

Our Mel Kranzberg:

Risks He Took, Stumbles, and Sometimes a Second Thought

Robert C. Post

My lifelong liberal inclinations lead me to welcome every prospect of international cooperation, but my acquaintance with Communist tactics makes me suspicious that there might be political motives behind seemingly innocent scholarly ventures.

—Melvin Kranzberg to Eugene Ferguson, 25 June 1965

[...] about the lack of sufficiently widespread foreign representation at the [SHOT] Critical Issues Conference, if you want a genuine Marxist historian of technology, you might invite Professor Eugeniusz Olszewski.

—Melvin Kranzberg to Carroll Pursell, 13 June 1978



Among our community of historians, studies of invention seem to be losing favour as research is increasingly focused on ‘technologies in use’. This is a welcome turn for the most part, but it does entail losses. For one, there is a fading interest in the anatomy of failure, inventions that did not ‘work’, once seen as a promising area of inquiry. (I am not including studies of failed *engineering*, a flourishing subset of the technologies-in-use literature – so, Tacoma Narrows but not the Spruce Goose.) We know from our personal experience how much we learn from failure, and I recall a puckish colleague’s idea for helping us keep this in mind: we should sit down and list our professional misfortunes as a counterpoint to what a Curriculum Vita represents, steps towards professional success. Instead of a CV, a resumé of

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virtues, it would be a Curriculum Failerus (CF), all the objectives we sought and, for one reason or another, were stymied. Article rejected, grant thwarted, initiative ignored. Job desired but not offered, an adverse promotion or tenure decision, of course. *A risk not taken*, perhaps most telling of all. Something as potentially dispiriting as a CF would appeal only to someone with a great deal to be proud of, and who took risks that seem bold in hindsight. Hence – in a volume celebrating ICOHTEC’s fortieth symposium, an anniversary that ushers in middle age and whose gemstone signifies an eternal flame, the ruby – I imagine that Mel Kranzberg might have enjoyed constructing a CF.

Mel stands so tall in our pantheon that a look at his failures may come as a shock. Some were minor. For one, he was never able to close negotiations for the radio programme in which he would have commented on current events in light of history. Some were not. He never got offered the directorship of the Smithsonian’s Air and Space Museum, a risk he would have taken. He was not invited to remain at Amherst College, the elite liberal-arts institution in Massachusetts where he taught for a few years and was then shown the door by a president he regarded as a good friend. Mel landed on his feet, but at a so-so Midwestern engineering school that did not even have a history department. At Case Institute of Technology, his main assignment was to teach Western Civilisation to kids who, as he later put it, ‘were profoundly uninterested because there were no figurative dollar signs in front of the course numbers’. ‘Western Civ’: It may sound quaint to our ears, but in the early Cold War years it was taking hold on college campuses from coast to coast, not least at engineering schools, whose students were thought to be in need of ‘rounding out’ and getting a recitation (in the snarky words of William McNeill) about ‘the progress of reason and liberty [...] in Greece, Rome, western Europe, and latterly the United States’.

Soon after arriving at Case, Mel signed a contract with a New York publishing house, Macmillan, to serve as lead author of a Western Civ textbook. This contract obliged him to deliver a manuscript within three years, even in the face of a heavy teaching load. That was unrealistic, and he missed his deadline, and another, and many more. Finally, after *thirteen* years, the project was cancelled by a Macmillan executive who had lost all faith. Actually, Mel himself had lost faith sometime earlier, simply because he had lost interest in traditional Western Civ themes. ‘Did the feudal system have Latin origins or Germanic origins?’ – *there* was an old chestnut. With due respect to those who still regarded this as a good question, Mel wondered what difference it made in contrast to new questions that had been brought to mind by Lewis Mumford’s *Technics and Civilization* and A. P. Usher’s *History of Mechanical Inventions*.

Still, the failure of the Macmillan project did Mel's ego no good (especially not in the midst of a topsy-turvy personal life) and might have left someone else in a Slough of Despond – someone who was not such a dauntless inventor. But Mel transferred his passion to a more novel publication project, serving as mentor and advance man for a junior partner who was to do most of the actual blue-pencil work on contributions Mel coaxed out of dozens of eminent authors. This was Carroll Pursell, and their project was *Technology in Western Civilization*, two volumes from Oxford, 1,600 pages, 90 essays, some of them a provocative synthesis of technology and culture. Here, truly, was 'a large canvas', as Angus Buchanan remarked in an extended review for the July 1968 issue of *Technology and Culture* (and a phrase Paul Ceruzzi would borrow for *T&C*'s 'Classics Revisited' series in July 2009). Here was a notable success, building on two others, the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT), which Mel had founded a decade before and, of course, SHOT's journal. But along the way there had been another stumble.

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Mel envisioned SHOT as part, but only part, of a wildly ambitious undertaking called the Center for the Study of Technology and Society (CSTS). The design was all his, though it was based on input from many advisors, from Lynn White, Carl Condit, John Rae, Thomas Hughes, Robert Multhauf and others who had gathered at the storied 1957 conference at Cornell University whence SHOT was reputed to trace its origins. About these origins fact and fable are intermixed, Mel's doing, but for sure he came away from Ithaca intent on minimising his allegiance to the History of Science Society (HSS), whose mandarins – perhaps even the president, Cornell's Henry Guerlac – had left him with the sense that they regarded the history of technology as just a province of their own realm, and not a very important one at that, a land of 'tinkers, not thinkers'. Mel's proposal for the CSTS was detailed in a hefty document he sent to Case Institute's vice president for academic affairs in March 1958, a plea to support 'a scholarly investigation of the relations of technology and society through the foundation of a Center to conduct research, develop a teaching program, sponsor publications, and otherwise aid in studying this important area of human activity'. *Important in its own right*, that was the point highlighted throughout.

Case Institute, wrote Mel, would provide 'the ideal combination of geographic location, intellectual environment, and educational enthusiasm'. At Case, he continued, there was 'a nucleus of scholars deeply interested in the study of technology and society'. Although he would have had to concede that the 'nucleus' was mostly just Prof. Kranzberg, Case did have programmes

in Operations Research, Management Development and Industrial Engineering that would provide natural complements for the CSTS, and Case was expanding its physical plant, especially with a new library, so Mel imagined there being space for a cluster of conference rooms, archives and an office suite for a learned journal, the sort of things that would make for an authentic Center. In league with the Case administration, he went after funding from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation. With Carnegie he felt confident, because it had supported development of the Case undergraduate programme in Humanities and Social Studies, on the basis of which he had been hired in the first place.

But something went wrong; Carnegie was not interested, nor was Ford. Mel suspected the Case administration had fumbled, and maybe it had. But in the event there would be no Center, only fragments, one being an improvised graduate programme in the history of technology, begun in 1962. This was hardly a triviality, not in light of a succession of noteworthy PhDs trained in that programme, but it was far from what Mel had originally imagined, with its own professoriate and its own curriculum, with publications, conferences, fellowships and student assistants, and with research projects aimed at elucidating such weighty concerns as 'the nature of the inventive process'. And with a director who was to be 'an individual of executive ability, one who possessed scholarly interests and a reputation in the field'. (Guess who?) Including a secretary, fringes and all, the cost would be \$22,000 for the first year but increasing in the second and third years 'as the Center enlarges the scope of its work and embarks on additional projects'. Mel was envisioning himself at the controls of a big machine with a total budget of \$150,000 per year, this at a time when pretty good academic take-home pay in the US was \$4,000.

Little of this ever happened. No research projects, no fellowships, no rich salaries, no office suite. Mel found money to subsidise publication of a quarterly journal in odd places like the Wilkie Foundation, whose motto was 'Civilization Through Tools', but *T&C* operations were all in one cramped room, overflowing with paper as only an editorial office could be in the days when everything was on paper. And that graduate programme? As Pursell so nicely put it, Mel was obliged to assemble it from 'found objects [...] an anthropology course here, a political science course there, a little English and some art history'. There was only a pittance from the Case Research Fund, which was intended to provide money for projects arising 'from the promising ideas of our younger staff members'. Even though Mel thought it ready to take wing, the Center for the Study of Technology in Society was a failed invention, a Spruce Goose, the novel device that could have 'worked' if only....

Mel's optimism was known to fail him – as we'll see presently – but his inventive disposition never. For, all the time he had been designing the CSTS, another invention was taking form in his mind's eye, and we now are getting to something that's close to the heart of anybody with a current subscription to *ICON*. With SHOT, Mel had managed to transcend disciplinary boundaries, attracting social scientists and humanists to the fold, attracting engineers and even inventors – people who had been, as Brooke Hindle once remarked, 'but slightly conscious of their common interest'. Beyond his interdisciplinary ideal, however, Mel also idealised a society that directly engaged people of many diverse nationalities. But SHOT did nothing of the sort; in a word, SHOT was parochial.

Mel was not. Mel had fought across Europe with General George Patton's Third Army. He had studied at the University of Heidelberg, at the Sorbonne, at the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques; he had taken his doctorate at Harvard with several of the great European historians of their time; he had published a book entitled *The Siege of Paris, 1870–1871: A Political and Social History*, as well as editing a booklet in D. C. Heath's 'Problems in European Civilization' entitled *1848: A Turning Point?* He was an officer in the Society for French Historical Studies and he was active in the American Historical Association (AHA), whose ranks were commanded by European historians. Only two of the contributors he enlisted for his Heath booklet taught at an American university, whereas every SHOT officer, every member of its executive and advisory councils, more than fifty men, all men, were from the USA. Mel dubbed *T&C* an 'International Quarterly', and this was not entirely amiss, for he had been moderately successful at getting submissions from abroad. But he quickly realised that face-to-face dialogue about 'what was being done in other countries', international participation at meetings, was going to be uncommon due to the cost of transatlantic travel, not to mention the time it took when airborne travel was not so commonplace (the very reason that the AHA had a Pacific Coast Branch).

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Mel was aware of an organisation that had succeeded in crossing borders all across Europe, even penetrating the Iron Curtain. It was sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and was called the International Union for the History and Philosophy of Science. And Mel was also aware of something else: even though he was not thrilled by its Marxist drift, it was largely because of this that – unlike the HSS – the International Union encouraged research in the history of technology and welcomed papers at the 'congress' it held every three years. Tinkers, yes, they were well worth study. In 1958, Mel was

awarded a grant by the Social Science Research Council to travel to the Ninth International Congress, in Barcelona. His official purpose was to present a paper on 'Criteria for an Industrial Revolution', but the aim he held most dear was 'to make international contacts'. Mel had corresponded with an academic cohort in France and other parts of 'the West', but never with anyone from the 'Eastern Bloc'.

That changed after Barcelona. Mel was thrilled that so many of the 105 papers 'dealt with aspects of *technological* history' – 21 papers, all told, many more than SHOT could scare up at first. And he was even more thrilled to meet Maurice Daumas, who was Redacteur-en-Chef of the *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences* (published with a UNESCO subvention), and who was then at work on a three-volume *Histoire des Techniques*, similar to the five volumes in English by Charles Singer and his colleagues. Daumas invited Mel to publish his Barcelona paper in the *Archives Internationales*, and then the two of them began corresponding, with Daumas providing introductions to other French scholars in response to Mel's keen interest 'in having [T&C] contributions from places outside America and in reviewing books published in languages other than English'. Later on, Mel recalled meeting two other notables in Barcelona: Anatole Zvorikin, from the USSR. Academy of Sciences, who was responsible for another multivolume history of technology, in Russian, and Eugeniusz Olszewski, Chair of the History of Technology at the Warsaw University of Technology. Getting together with both men, he wrote, 'made me realise that the warmth of scholarly companionship need not be affected by the political chill accompanying the Cold War'.

But this was not just a little later on, it was thirty-five years after the event, in 1994, and time had played tricks with Mel's memory. First, he never met either of these men in Barcelona (actually, there were very few attendees from the 'Eastern Bloc'), and, even though Olszewski would become a lifelong friend, Mel's relationship with Zvorikin was almost always chilly. Zvorikin had served on the editorial board of *Pravda* and that alone said a lot. Still, the flip side of this was that he was considered 'trustworthy' by the Kremlin and thus permitted to travel as an official emissary of the Soviet regime. In the summer of 1962, he was slated to be in America for conferences in Chicago and Washington, D.C., and Mel invited him to come to Cleveland as well, to present talks to, and talk with, Case faculty and students in the new PhD programme. Mel was given to understand that Zvorikin 'preferred to speak solely on matters which had no immediate political overtones', and the man he met at the Cleveland airport was quiet and rather charming. But, what a naïve misunderstanding! Once Zvorikin got up in front of an audience, he showed himself to be 'inflexible in his attachment to dogma and unable, or unwilling, to tie his vague generalisations to specific facts'. These

were Mel's words and afterwards he had to report to Case President Keith Glennan – doubly embarrassed because Glennan was a loyal supporter – that Zvorikin 'exhibited no curiosity about what we are doing, how we are doing it, and why'. All that most people would remember about his two-day visit were his incessant 'anti-capitalist harangues'. When it came to imparting a positive spin to some untoward event Mel had no peer, however, and, in a report to the PhD programme's trustees, he wrote that 'our students learned very little about the history or sociology of technology, but a great deal about the workings of the Soviet Mind'.

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That autumn, Mel headed for the Tenth International Congress uneasy about encountering Zvorikin again, but in happy anticipation of a reunion with Daumas, and with an invention just beginning to come together in his mind's eye, one that he could try out on other European scholars whom he had never met. He was able to talk with A. G. Drachman and Bertrand Gille, and with Seymon Shuchardin, whose title was Secretary General of the Science and Technology Section of the Union of Soviet Society for Friendship, and who was much more agreeable than Zvorikin – and would become a fast friend. And then there was Eugeniusz Olszewski, like Daumas a correspondent of Mel's since Barcelona. 'Many English and American scholars', Mel had written him in 1959, 'are not aware of the significant scholarly works in the history of technology which are being published in Polish'. In reply, Olszewski expressed 'real pleasure in starting a closer cooperation'. In getting to know Olszewski, writes Slawomir Lotysz, 'Kranzberg felt like he was re-discovering a new world', and for Olszewski their interaction 'was like a flow of fresh air [...] from which most East Europeans had been disconnected for two decades'.

In his 1994 'Personal Reminiscences', Mel recalled a dialogue with Daumas, Shuchardin and Olszewski that was impelled by their mutual enthusiasm for 'an *international* organisation to bring together historians of technology on a world-wide scale' – an exciting prospect for sure, but the confidence implied in this remark made long afterward reflects none of Mel's actual ambivalence about new friends from the 'Eastern Bloc'. Having had to contend with Zvorikin was reason enough, but there was also what he was learning about Olszewski, who might have first struck him as an ideal confederate in the project of 'opening channels of communication between Eastern and Western scholars'. But there was ideology as well as an ideal, and Olszewski was infected with Marxist dogma too. In 1946, Winston Churchill had invented a phrase that would define geopolitics for decades, the Iron Curtain. This Iron Curtain was to prove formidable even among

men who shared a devotion to history. Like other American academics of his generation, who had seen victory over Nazi Germany followed by the subjugation of Eastern Europe to another dictatorship, Stalinism, and then seen other men ostensibly trained as scholars get seduced by a repellent dogma, Mel was a quintessential Cold-War liberal, profoundly anti-Communist.

In 1962, the Tenth International Congress was hosted by Henry Guerlac at Cornell, and this made for a strange resonance with events five years before. It was Guerlac whom Mel would cast as the culprit in his SHOT creation story, a story invented long after the event. This time, Guerlac played no role at all and the story going forward had Olszewski in the lead role because the Eleventh Congress in 1965 was slated for Warsaw. If there were to be a new history-of-technology section established within the framework of the International Union, Olszewski would have to take care of the necessary leg-work with the Communist bureaucracy, whose approval was essential. After that, the assumption was that the charge would be led by Mel, and he seemed to be ready. But early in the summer of 1965, just months before the Congress was scheduled to begin, Mel lost his nerve and changed his mind. It's a story he never put into print, and comes out only in his private correspondence.

The colleague in the US whose advice Mel sought most often was Eugene Ferguson, then a professor at Iowa State University, both an engineer and first-rate historian. One of Ferguson's chief concerns was the propagation of humane values, especially among engineers – 'the encouragement of sanity', he called it – and for him the foremost question was whether another organisation would help this cause. In June 1965, Mel addressed a long letter to Ferguson, a few words of which are quoted in the epigraph, about the irony that someone who had 'been instrumental in founding a new learned society [SHOT], would argue *against the proliferation of organisations*, especially in the field of study to which I am so thoroughly committed'. But it was not just proliferation as a general concern of many academics, a concern about the risks of 'fragmentation'. It was about the risks of trying to form an alliance with Communists.

In the early 1960s, physician Frederick Schwarz wrote an American best-seller entitled *You Can Trust the Communists (to be Communists)*. Schwarz was founder of a right-wing organisation called the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, and in many ways Schwarz and Kranzberg were polar opposites. But they were of one mind in their distrust of Communists, an emotion then so pervasive and so powerful in the US that it remains a mystery to many Europeans. For Mel, distrust stemmed in part on a recent real-life experience, Zvorikin's Case antics, which left him 'fearful of the future because of the realisation of the dedicated and committed nature of the genuine Communist intellectual'. Added to this was Mel's distress after arranging to edit the

volume Zvorikin was writing for UNESCO's *History of the Scientific and Cultural Development of Mankind*. (Mel always needed money and often freelanced.) He told UNESCO's general editor, the exalted Charles Morazé, that the translation he first saw was dull, shallow, poorly informed, and, worst, that it betrayed a toxic 'combination of Marxist ideology and Russian nationalistic bias'. Best to discard the manuscript altogether and tell Zvorikin to start again, that was his advice to Morazé.

But Olszewski: Mel liked him personally as much as he had grown to dislike Zvorikin and he was terribly distressed to learn about the politics of this man who was as central to the establishment of the history of technology in Poland as Mel himself was in the USA. Olszewski's origins, like Mel's, were thoroughly bourgeois. But Lotysz tells of his utter devotion to Marxism and how, in lectures at Warsaw University of Technology, he would express 'a

special estimation' for Engels's *Dialectic of Nature*, and an engineering student remembers him saying things like 'I will be teaching you the Marxist mechanics'. Lotysz adds, 'Today it would sound like a joke, but it was not'. And it surely would not have been a joke to Mel; more like a tragedy. If that were not enough, Olszewski was evidently having his own second thoughts about the new initiative, or at least he had gotten bogged down in a stifling bureaucracy. Crucial arrangements in Warsaw had been left up to him, but after a long silence he wrote to Mel to say that nothing was to be expected there beyond a 'preliminary discussion'.

It seems that Olszewski was not prepared to risk a move that smacked of undue friendship with the West. Even in the 1970s, when Mel named him a Corresponding Member



Figure 1. At ICOHTEC's 15th Symposium in 1986 in Dresden, the German Democratic Republic, Mel Kranzberg proudly displays the aphorism that would become renowned as his 'First Law'.

of SHOT, Olszewski told of a rule that required official permission 'to get engaged in foreign scientific societies'. Just a formality, yes, of course, but one likely to take 'some weeks to be settled', and then only after Polish officials could 'examine the statutes' of any society making such an offer. Mel was totally exasperated, but was careful not to reveal this to a man who had become a dear friend despite his wayward politics, and one can imagine Mel being brought to tears when Olszewski prefaced a 1985 article entitled 'The Role of Technology in Socialist Countries' with Kranzberg's First Law – *Technology is neither good, nor is it bad; nor is it neutral*. By then Mel had not only forgiven his friend of his Marxism, he was rather proud of it and even told him tongue-in-cheek that his first law was 'much in keeping with the ideas of such other great thinkers as Marx and Lenin'

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There is some disagreement, it seems, about who was most essential to setting ICOHTEC in motion, about who should get credit as 'the inventor'. In Poland, Olszewski gets the credit. Mel, an immensely generous man, gave him credit too. But Angus Buchanan calls it Mel's 'brainchild', and Hans Braun says that Mel was 'the driving force'. So it follows that when Mel told Ferguson about being 'suspicious that there might be political motives behind seemingly innocent scholarly ventures', he must have realised that he was in a position to put a lid on this venture, and he may actually have come close to doing so before changing his mind. What happened? Did Ferguson advise him to carry on? Maybe, but I might suggest something more important: the time Mel spent pondering events at Cornell in 1957. Whatever the details, at issue then was a question of cooperation between Guerlac's well-established enterprise, the History of Science Society, and Mel's little band of novice enthusiasts for technological history. The HSS welcome-mat was not out very far, if at all.

Mel surely understood that much of what passed for history of technology in those days, wherever it came from, was not very good, and what *was* good had not invariably been ignored by the HSS in its journal: Marie Boas on Hero's Pneumatica, Henry Webb on Elizabethan Gunnery, Ed Rosen on eyeglasses, Donald Fleming on the Watt engine, even the sainted George Sarton on floating docks. So Mel himself was now, in the 1960s, in a position similar to Guerlac's in the 1950s. Yes, what had been submitted to *T&C* from the Eastern Bloc was rarely good history; even if not stuck in a Marxist wilderness, it was naïve and under-researched. One can understand Mel's concern. But would not a French historian like Mel have been well attuned to *the way behavior so often changes when the powerless gain power*? I believe he was, and he was not ready to play Robespierre.

In his 'Personal Reminiscences', Mel recounted with relish the days in Poland when his internationalist enthusiasm was reinvigorated, first when he arrived at the university and bumped in to Joseph Needham and Ladislao Redi along with Daumas, Shuchardin and Olszewski. Then a social occasion, a home-cooked roast-geese dinner, prepared by Olszewski's wife Barbara, after which Mel and the other three pledged to attain formal recognition of their new organisation at the next International Congress. Partly a fable, perhaps? Mel was known to invent fables, but surely the roast geese had something to do with him deciding to forge on ahead rather than step aside. Those Communist historians and their bad history? Why, they should be helped to do better.

As we know, in order to assure that 'the Cold War was never incorporated into the structure of the international community of historians of technology', ICOHTEC's executive positions, president and secretary-general, were divided between East and West, Olszewski and Daumas, as were two vice presidencies, one for Kranzberg and one for Shuchardin. It took some time for ICOHTEC to gain momentum, not least because it had to negotiate an ideological chasm. Yet, what Mel wrote to Pursell in 1978 suggests that he had come to appreciate something in Olszewski's faith as a 'genuine Marxist'. Compared to SHOT, ICOHTEC has remained small, but on one count it has always been far ahead, that 'worldwide' scope. There was nobody on the SHOT executive council from beyond North America until 1986. To the end of his days Mel would be urging SHOT to catch up, and nearly two decades after his death it is still trying.

What most inspired and invigorated Mel was not pedagogy, not scholarship (although he was a great teacher and a good scholar), but rather the process of invention. As with his ventures with Macmillan and then Oxford, if one had failed, there would be another. If an institutional initiative failed, as did the Center for the Study of Technology and Society, he soon was scouting out possibilities for another. If one society failed to live up to all his dreams, he would try again. When ICOHTEC first convened at Pont-à-Mousson, on the Moselle, as a French historian Mel was pleased, as an inventor he was overjoyed. He would see discordant episodes, ups and downs, even intimations of failure in the 1970s, but, ICOHTEC would emerge as a vital force in the 1980s under an inspired leadership that carries on still. It is tempting for a historian to read history backwards and to assume that what we have presently is the 'outcome' of what preceded – skipping the alternative outcomes if risks had not been taken or second thoughts not rethought yet again. Even though there are fewer and fewer of us who knew Kranzberg personally, he remains Our Mel and, like the rest of us, his career embodied ingredients for an arresting CV, and for a CF, too.