
“Proud to Work for the University”

Kristin Kovacic

In June 1958 Bogdan Kovacic, my father, emigrated from Zagreb, Yugoslavia, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As he likes to tell the story, he had a quarter in his pocket as the train rolled into Penn Station, and he used that to buy some crackers, hedging his bets against his next meal. He was twenty-six years old and spoke little English. He had left behind family, all of his good friends, his teammates from the professional handball team he played for. He was alone, he figured, and about to see the world.

This is part of the myth of my family, a story familiar to many Pittsburghers with immigrant roots. I am, I'm afraid, about to tell you a very old story.

Jobs, in 1958, were plentiful in Pittsburgh. Cousin Francie got him in at the plate factory. He hauled plates, dropping them now and then and making a big crash. He went to English classes at night, penciled neat meaningless sentences in a grammar book I have here—“Only a few friends are bidden to come,” and, with emphasis, “You are never too old to learn.” He signed his new American name, Andrew, over and over in the margins. He learned the questions he'd soon have to answer: “Are you a Bolshevik, anarchist, communist, or polygamist?” “What does Thanksgiving Day mean?” He met my mother, practiced his new words.

Trained as an electrician in Zagreb, he looked for work in his field. A friend told him he could get him in at the mill, and he went to have a look: the heat, the smoke, the filth over everything. He said no thanks; he'd have to work in hell soon enough. He found a job as an electrician at West Penn Hospital, good clean work. He was promoted to foreman. He bought a Chevy, sky blue.

Then we were born: my brother Andy, my sister Lara, and I. This, apparently, changed everything. He started night school again, and, with an electrical degree from Allegheny Technical Institute, he landed a job at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in 1969—two years before Richard Cyert assumed the presidency of the university. I remember the

day Dad started, the new uniform my mother pressed off, and the first time the promise was made to us: you will get an education there. At that time, all Carnegie Mellon University employees were promised full undergraduate tuition for their children who were accepted there. That day, too, was the first time the challenge was set down: you will have to do well enough in school to be accepted. I was six, my brother seven, my sister was learning to crawl. It was a challenge we took very seriously; it was, we figured, our shot at seeing the world.

In those days we were required, on the first day of school, to say our names and what our fathers did for a living. One by one the kids would recite their names and then, simply, "J&L" or "Homestead," or "Duquesne Works." I would wait my turn, and then somewhat haughtily announce, "My dad is an electrician at Carnegie Mellon University. I'm going to college there, free." I told people even when they didn't ask me.

Carnegie Mellon became our identity, the greatest part of our family myth. While the men in the mills, our neighbors, were making much more money than Dad, locked into contracts in the glory days of steel, he, at least, had *invested*, had guaranteed our futures. We got Carnegie Mellon sweatshirts, tee-shirts, and notebooks for our birthdays. We cheered the buggys at carnival. When Dad worked weekends, we'd sometimes visit him on campus and ride in his little electric car, surveying what we knew would someday be ours—our library, our gymnasium, our student union. At night, passing by, we saw the beacon light in Hamerschlag Hall which Dad had installed. "That's my light," he'd say, and there it was, beckoning.

We also participated, through him, in Carnegie Mellon's road to academic glory. My dad didn't work at a factory, he worked for the university—among artists, engineers, and scientists. I didn't, for most of my early lifetime, see any fundamental difference between what my father and a professor of electrical engineering did for a living. They both worked for the university.

My father worked on experiments with monkeys and with robots. He helped harness energy from still water, bringing the physicist home for dinner after their hard day's work. Dad's work allowed Kathleen Mulcahy, the glass artist, to safely power her magnificent kiln. When he brought home the beautiful vase she made for him, my mother set it on the television set in the living room, eventually decorating the whole room around it—such colors we had never thought of bringing together. If my father was never going to see the world, Carnegie Mellon brought it closer to him and, by consequence, to us.

He was there when the computers arrived, the machines that would launch Carnegie Mellon's international star. I remember sitting at the

dinner table while Dad told us about the computers, how, when we got to college, there would be a computer for every student; how we'd find a book in the library just by pushing a button; how there might not *be* any more books in the library, the computer taking over every aspect of our education. I remember being somewhat skeptical—this was long before *computer* was a household word, much less a household item. But, finally, I believed. Dad had the plans; he knew what was coming. He was the man who powered those glorious machines, who would later coordinate the installation of the "Andrew" computer network.

In 1981 I arrived and began my Carnegie Mellon education. On my first day of my first class—a core curriculum sociology course—we read about the concept of class in American society. We learned how to identify the working class from the middle class; there were just a few simple rules. The working class, my textbook said, works with its hands or, in the case of women, does clerical work like typing or filing. I did a little figuring. My mother is a secretary. My father is an electrician. His hands can get very dirty when he works, and he is scrupulous about washing them. He always carries Band-Aids in his wallet, ready for the daily cuts he gets at work, usually on his hands.

You can identify the working class, my textbook said, by the arrangement of their homes. The working class keeps its television set in the living room, for example, while the middle class keeps it in another place, like a den. I thought about our living room, Kathleen Mulcahy's vase crowning the television like a jewel. I thought, for the very first time, that I was working-class. It was a genuine surprise.

I'm told that Andrew Carnegie founded Carnegie Institute of Technology for the education of the working classes of Pittsburgh. Long before I arrived, that mission had been abandoned as unprestigious and, more to the point, unprofitable. My classmates were from out of town, the daughters and sons of doctors, entrepreneurs, foreign financiers. Many of them rarely saw their parents, much less ran into them in Baker Hall, fixing a switch box. I learned the difference between an electrician and an electrical engineer. None of that bothered me; it surprised me, opening my picture of the world, and where I fit into it, much wider. Likewise, much about my life surprised my friends, whom I would bring home with me on holidays and weekends, introducing them to a genuine working-class home, television set and all. During my years in school my parents responded generously to CMU's requests for giving from parents, believing, in a way that other parents could not, that the money was going to the university's collective pot, whose assets were essentially our own. They also, I think, enjoyed the

letters that came to the house afterwards: "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Kovacic, thank you for your generous gift."

In May 1985 I graduated, valedictorian of my college. I was selected to deliver the student commencement address, and on that day, under the big tent, a number of our family dreams came together. My father was sitting, suit and tie, in the audience. My sister, who had just been accepted for admission in the fall, sat next to him, checking out *her* campus. My brother, who, after receiving his associates' degree in forestry from Penn State University, was hired by CMU as a gardener—following my father's path—stood on the edge of the tent in his uniform. His boss had given him special permission to attend; normally the gardeners have to stay in their shop during the ceremonies. I dedicated the speech to my father, and I used my remarks to remind my classmates about the wonder, the absolute fortune, that we were going to do our work in life with questions, theories, problems, and poems—not with our backs, not with our bleeding hands. "Very well done," President Cyert said, shaking my hand on the dais. He told the audience that he was pleased to see the daughter of a staff member be so successful at the university.

When I think about that day now, the memory is very sweet, but I am also reminded that certain dread wheels were already in motion. The university, at the time of my graduation, was about to divide the workers' union (SEIU Local 29), selling off the janitors to a management firm (ABM) and cutting them off from Carnegie Mellon benefits, including tuition benefits. Those people, many of whom were Dad's friends, no longer worked for the university. Shortly after my graduation the administration dropped *university* from its official name, suggesting that it was more like a corporation than an institution of higher education, more like a factory than a school.

Contract battles for Dad's union became increasingly difficult to win. The administration, which for years claimed that its pay scale could never compete with the steel industry's, took advantage of the labor climate in the wake of steel's collapse to demand concessions. The administration hired outside firms to "consult" on the efficiency of the physical plant. There were layoffs. One of those firms became the manager of Carnegie Mellon's building and maintenance operations, introducing suspicion among the physical plant workers—in spite of the administration's written assurances—that there would be further layoffs and that what had happened to the janitors might eventually happen to them.

In May 1990 my sister graduated with high honors, and we gathered again under the tent, to celebrate again the fulfillment of Dad's

promise. President Cyert, saying his last farewells, recalled the achievements of his twenty-one years in office, the remarkable rise of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Tech to the global institution called Carnegie Mellon. My father, in the audience, could look back on those very same years, knowing that he had had a hand in all of it and that he had, in spite of all of the hard, physical work, made a very good investment in a growing institution. A steel mill might close, rust, and be razed to a clear toxic field, like the J&L South Side works he passed every day on his way to Oakland. But the university would always be there.

My sister and I were on our way. My brother was doing well in his job. Dad had three years until he could retire, and he was already planning. He would play more tennis (he is still, at sixty, a remarkable athlete). He and my mother would travel, back to Yugoslavia, where his family still lives, and to the other parts of the world they hadn't gotten around to seeing.

In June, after the tent had come down and the campus emptied out, the faculty and students returning to the cities that they come from, Dad reported to work, punched his clock. He was told not to work but to go directly through a door that closed behind him and seventeen other people, including two-thirds of all of the university's electricians, who were about to lose their jobs. They were told, for the first time, that there was a budget crisis that would require layoffs. They were told to turn in their keys and to be off the campus grounds by 10 A.M. They saw university police as they emerged, dazed by the blindsided blow. "Like criminals," my mother told me, through tears, over the phone. She didn't think about the cost, the financial straits this would place them in. She thought about betrayal. "They treated him like a criminal, after all those years."

My father harbored no illusions about Carnegie Mellon's benevolence. He had seen, over the years, the university's antagonism toward its union. But in 1969 he had signed what he thought was a lifetime contract—he would give them a lifetime of hard labor; they would educate his children and allow him to retire, not comfortably, but in peace. It was not an extravagant plan.

Unfortunately for him, the Carnegie Mellon that let him go was not the university that had hired him, or perhaps, sadly, it was. How could he have known that the master plan of the global university, like that of a global corporation, included the abandonment of its responsibility to the blue-collar workers in its community, not to mention its utter disregard for their intelligence and pride? At the same moment that my father and sixteen other skilled construction and maintenance workers were shown, by an armed guard, the door, the administration

announced the acceptance of a five million dollar gift from Paul Mellon toward new campus construction. Who, these men and women were forced to wonder, would be doing it? Who would design, construct, wire, and maintain the growth for which, as Dr. Cyert so elegantly phrased it for the reporters, "Carnegie Mellon's appetite continues to grow the larger [it] gets?" The arithmetic is tragically easy to do, even without a Carnegie Mellon education—why support loyal, lifetime employees when you can buy contracted work for less? At the same moment that my father faced the prospect of finding, at sixty, a new job, President Cyert eased into his retirement. The administration, as reported by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, was then finalizing plans to purchase a \$1.9 million Sewickley estate for its new president, his wife, and their six horses.

"The emerging global company is divorced from where it produces its goods," Robert B. Reich, lecturer in public policy at the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government [now Secretary of Labor], told the *New York Times*. "It has no heart, and it has no soul. It is a financial enterprise designed to maximize profits. Many of the people who inhabit it may be fine, upstanding human beings, but the organization has its own merciless logic."

It was just this merciless logic, I have to believe, that caused my father to lose his job. Carnegie Mellon is a thriving, growing institution. It is not facing a budgetary crisis; it is facing a moral one—whether to cultivate the community of a university or the elite positioning of a corporation. My family felt, with great pride, a part of an educational community, until, without ceremony, Carnegie Mellon abandoned its role in it. Now, like too many other working-class families in Pittsburgh, we're left with the caution that it was foolish to have believed.

So now my father, writing in the workbook he received at his "transition" seminar, dutifully answers their questions. What do you feel is your greatest accomplishment? "My greatest accomplishment," he writes in the clipped, impossible language he has never learned to love, "is my family." What was most satisfying about your previous employment? "I was very proud," he says, carefully calling up the past tense, "to work for the university."

Kristin Kovacic is a free-lance writer and editor in Pittsburgh. Her fiction and essays have appeared in Cimarron Review, Kansas Quarterly, Carolina Quarterly, River Styx, Gulf Stream, and other magazines. She recently completed work on the "Woman to Woman on Lifetime" television poetry project.