



Klimt and Me

Christian Robert Klimt (25 December 1918 – 31 August 1994), Chris to me, rarely Dr Klimt.

We got joined at the hip when Chris came to Minneapolis, newly appointed to the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, looking for someone to work with him on a diabetes project he was heading up.

We were Mutt and Jeff. Me tall and lanky. Chris short and rounding.

Chris was 15 years my senior and worldly. A farmer from Sleepy Eye paired with a researcher from the World Health Organization. How is that going to work?

Chris was born in Vienna. I do not know where he spent his youth but I do know he had a fondness for Kössen. I remember being his guest there and a vague memory of meeting his mother there.

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Kössen is a town of about 4,000 in the western portion of Austria, near the German border; about 130 miles south of Munich and 260 miles east of Zürich.

Chris's mother was a fashion designer. I know nothing about his father but I do know Gustav Klimt (1862 – 1918) was a distant relative. Gustav Klimt was an impressionist painter best known for “The Kiss” – a reproduction hanging in the halls of the Hopkins School of Public Health.

Chris got his medical degree from the University of Vienna in 1944 and his Doctor of Public Health from Johns Hopkins in 1959.

Chris was conscripted into the German Army near the end of WW II after he got his medical degree. He went AWOL near the end of the war at considerable risk to him, his young wife, Helga, and young son, Claudius.

The Klimt's eventually had four children: Claudius, Ronald, Andrea, and Sandra.

Chris's first trip to the U.S. came in 1951 when he received a fellowship from Rockefeller University to study at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. During that visit he was recruited by the National Foundation of Infantile Paralysis to work on a trial of hyperimmune gamma globulin in children exposed to polio.

I got connected with Chris in the fall of 1960.

Early on it became clear that ours was not a match made in heaven. Chris was the Herr Professor type. Whatever he said he expected to be done, and fast. His Herr Professorness was tolerable – except when it invaded my space.

Chris and I had different mind sets. He liked to bulldoze his way through. I liked to persuade by reason. He thrived on chaos. I hated chaos. He was drawn to controversy like a moth to flame. I ran the other way.

He had a well-developed ego that needed nourishing. Eventually I learned that if I wanted my way on some scientific or procedural issue, I would make him think it was his idea.

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I learned things are not always the way they seem when I had occasion to see Chris, husband and father, in his home. It was obvious there that Helga ruled the roost. She was the glue that held the family together.

When Helga died of cancer, Chris was lost. Morose and depressed. So much so that he took his own life with an overdose of sleeping pills a few years after Helga died.

I hated writing papers with Chris. His style was Germanic with run-on sentences. Mine was “Midwest Sleepy Eye”. It was always a test of wills as to who blinked first when writing.

Another thing I hated was riding with Chris. For years he had a VW bug. Later a Ford station wagon and after that a Mercedes. I always cringed when he suggested driving to a meeting because, for my taste, he drove too fast and spent too much time looking at women he passed. Not many passed him because he trained on the Autobahn in Germany.

Most of the trips were white knuckle affairs, made worse by the fact that they were before seat belts. Our second trip to Williamson, West Virginia was with Chris behind the wheel in his Ford station wagon. Thad Prout, a fellow colleague from the UGDP, was in the suicide seat. I was in the back.

It could not have been a mile from having been picked up when I ended up on the floor. There would be several more such incidents before we got back. On the way back I was tempted to sit on the floor simply to avoid the wear and tear of getting off the floor.

Later on he became part owner of an airplane. After he got his pilots license I lived in fear he would invite me for a ride. I had visions of Al Pacino’s ride with Jack Warden over the Chesapeake bay in the film “And Justice for All”. Warden liked to go out as far into the bay with just enough fuel to get back. He and Al Pacino just about made it back when Warden took him for a ride.

Fortunately Chris never asked me.

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Martin Goldner was in charge of the diabetes clinic at the Jewish Hospital and Medical Center of Brooklyn.

It was fairly early in the course of the UGDP, at an investigators meeting in Cincinnati. We had just broken for lunch and in the milling-around phase before lunch. I was talking to colleagues when distracted by loud voices behind me. I turned to discover Martin Goldner and Chris Klimt toe-to-toe over some authorship dispute for a UGDP paper in the works. The argument was because Chris had changed the order of authors. For a while it looked like the two were to come to blows, but eventually tempers settled and the incident faded.

At the time Goldner was not one of my favorites because he seemed aloof and arrogant. I sided with Chris, but the incident puzzled me. It seemed too trivial to have precipitated such outrage by Goldner.

I learned long ago that when $2 + 2$ does not equal 4 I am missing something. I was missing something, but what?

A year or so later I warmed to Martin Goldner, even with touches of fondness. It was then, at another investigators meeting, during a moment at cocktails before eating, when I asked Goldner what the brouhaha was about in Cincinnati. He said it created a flashback to his days in Germany in the late 1930s. He was working with his professor on a chemistry textbook. When the book was published his name was gone. Stripped away because he was Jewish!

Finally I understood what I was missing in Cincinnati.

Chris was fond of extolling "controlled burns" as strategies for dealing with difficult issues. I had witnessed a few. To me they were more like what happened to Challenger after liftoff.

A memorable burn was on checking into the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco. Our plane had been delayed. It was about midnight when we arrived. We had guaranteed reservations, but the hotel was full. We were to be shunted to another hotel.

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Chris puffed up like a grouse in mating season and started snorting at the hotel clerk. Before long I retreated behind a large flower pot in the middle of the lobby.

The clerk summoned his supervisor. Chris shouts at him. The supervisor tells him the same thing – no rooms. Chris keeps shouting. I slink further behind the flower pot.

This goes on until the supervisor announces that the bridal suite is available.

When I heard that I thought I might have to share a bed with Klimt, but the room had two beds. Some bridal suite.

Invariably in senior-junior relationship there comes a point when the relationship reaches equity. My coming of age took place under a cherry tree in our yard.

I should guess it was the late 70s. I am still at the University of Maryland, still working on the UGDP and by then also involved in the Coronary Drug Project.

By then we had expanded from when it was just Klimt and me to many, one of the many being Olli Miettinen.

Olli was from Finland. He was an MD, PhD with a medical degree from the University of Helsinki and a PhD from the University of Minnesota.

Surprisingly, Olli and Chris got along – until Olli decided to leave for Harvard and take a study we had with him. Once that happened, Chris regarded him as a wayward son. His fall from grace was swift and irretrievable.

I got along with Olli. I knew stuff he did not know. He asked me to help him in the transition. I said I would.

Klimt got wind of that and festered until a Saturday afternoon in July. Here he comes. (I never liked it when he showed up unannounced because almost always there was something bad that had happened or that was about to.)

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I was busy working in the yard and did not want to invite him in (because I had a notion that he wanted to bitch about me and Olli), so I dragged up lawn chairs under the cherry tree. We talked for a time and then he got to why he was there. He wanted me to cut my tie with Olli. I said I did not want to do that because I had already said "yes".

So we bantered. The longer we did the more Chris dug in. Finally, he puffed himself up and said "I am the boss and I am telling you to cut the tie!" I took a deep breath and said, quietly and deliberately, "Chris, I recognize your right to give such an order, but if you do I will resign." Chris said "I so order" and I said "I resign".

With that I got up and walked in the house and told my wife that I had just quit my job.

"Oh my! What are we going to do now?"

"I have not the foggiest".

The next morning, around 10, here comes Chris. I say to myself, "For certain he can't be coming to fire me again".

I sensed a change of heart. Sure enough. He offered that if I wanted to maintain my tie with Olli it was alright. "OK, then I withdraw my resignation." And with that I unquit.

Ironically, a couple of years later, Olli fired me.

Oh well!

Before the Cherry Tree event I was, in Chris's eyes a faithful employee. After the event I was a colleague.
