Classmates,

There is no one more qualified in the Class of '72 to write a memoir than Barbara Carton. Following her undergraduate education where she was a sociology major, Barbara obtained her MS in journalism from Boston University and then embarked on a 30 year career as a newspaper reporter for the Gloucester, MA Daily Times, the Providence, RI Journal, the Boston Globe, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. Ms. Carton, a native of Winnetka, IL, currently resides in Jamestown, R.I. with her three daughters – Catherine (17) and twins Elizabeth and Margaret (14). She is currently retired as raising three teenagers is a full-time job. I hope you enjoy her reflections on one of the most popular Penn professors of our day – Dr. Alexander Riasanovsky.

If you wish to contribute a memoir of your own, please let me know by emailing me at Friar72@gmail.com. In coming months, we will have memoirs by H. Kell Yang, Mitch Rofsky, Brian Keefe, Margaret Rose Ryan, and Martin “Mick” McCue.

Best,
Jeff Rothbard
President, Class of 1972
My vote for “Best of Penn” is retired Russian history professor emeritus Dr. Alexander Riasanovsky, 84.

Once, Dr. R was so captivated by his topic that he inadvertently walked off the podium headed down a hall and went through a door before he realized he had left his audience behind.

“I was just so absorbed,” he said.

Dr. R also loved the Crimean War (1854-55). He himself recalls the day he was “gesticulating wildly and waxing eloquently” about describing how the British and French could smash the city of Sevastopol with artillery fire when – WHAM! – a nearby classroom door shattered, glass flying everywhere.

“It was totally coincidental,” he says, but it provided the perfect Crimean salvo.

Everyone has his or her favorite Dr. R moment. The formation of the state in the 9th Century. Catherine the Great. Ivan the Terrible punching St. Basil’s architects’ eyes out.

And, in a 40 year career that spanned 1959-99, there were a lot of stupendous teaching moments, as well as distinguished teaching awards and other kudos too many to mention here.

Since he has now achieved emeritus status, I reached Dr. R at his winter home in Tampa, Fl., where he is working on a book of Russian poetry. He said that he never understood why his lecture halls were packed.

“It seems kind of silly that several hundred students would listen to lectures on Russian history of a thousand years ago,” he says.

But, those of us who were lucky enough to be in his lecture hall knew why. He was passionate, and he conveyed that passion.
“You want to set up an environment where students want to learn,” he said. “I was, and still am, very deeply interested in Russian history, and if I could convey just a bit of that interest, I had it made as a teacher.”

Our main text, A History of Russia, the standard in the field, had actually been written by Dr. R’s late brother, Nicholas, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. R and a colleague also supplemented “Nik-Nik’s” tome heavily with original readings, literature, art and so many tidbits about Russian life and mores.

I confessed to him recently that I had dreamed of switching majors after taking his two-semester survey course, History 48 and 49, but was too far along in my major to do so.

No, he protested. I should have marched into his office! He would have set me free! He would have made it work!!

I believe he would have made it work, even though I was on the brink of graduation. He would have done anything for his students. “The students were always so nice and kind,” he said.

I’ve still reaped more from Dr. Riasanovsky than from any professor I’ve ever had.

Through him, I discovered not only Russia’s historical past, but also the world of Tolstoy, Turgenev and so much more.

So while I looked like a goofball garbed in my Vietnam-era patched bellbottoms and love beads, Dr. Riasanovsky planted a seed that took hold – and, that’s what the best professors do. I first visited Russia in January 1991. Still, it seemed magical because I felt as if I had been there before…in Dr. R’s lecture hall.

I didn’t need Fodor’s; I already had had Dr. Fodor!

The only surprise was visiting when I did; 1991 was a period of transition. The foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, had recently resigned, stating that the country was moving towards dictatorship.
Others spoke of civil war. Soviet tanks had moved into the Baltics. Food shortages were so extreme that our Soviet propaganda guides gracefully accepted bread and sausages off our plates. That summer, there would be a failed coup, and by year’s end, the Soviet system would have collapsed, splintering into 15 newly-independent republics.

But, even now in this post-Soviet period, Dr. R’s teaching provides a background with which to understand the problems associated with expectations of Russia moving overnight from a Socialist to a capitalist state.

Forty years on, his teaching lives on.

An addendum:

When the class of 1966 held its’ 45th reunion, a survey question on “favorite Penn professors” found Dr. R at the top of the list. As a result, Steve Klitzman, C’66, the reunion communications chair, conducted a question & answer session with Dr. Riasanovsky, which he subsequently shared with me, along with pictures of Dr. R. One of them depicted him romping in a big fur hat with his beloved Borzoi (Russian wolfhound) dogs, one of which won a prize at the coveted Westminster Dog Show.

A second addendum:

Regardless of how one feels about the recent best-seller, In The Garden of Beasts by Erik Larsen, I was astounded to find this reference on page 413:

“While I was an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, I took two wonderful courses from (Alexander V. Riasanovsky), who, on one noteworthy evening, taught me and my roommates how to drink vodka Russian style.

“It was his delightful lecture style, however, that had the greater influence, and drove me to spend most of my time at Penn studying Russian history, literature and language.”

As you can see, I am not alone.

Barbara W. Carton, CW ’72, is a former longtime former staff reporter for the Wall Street Journal, as well as the Boston Globe and Washington Post.