

John P. Windmuller

December 4, 1923 — December 2, 2003

The passing of John Windmuller brings a special opportunity for reflection to those of us who shared many years on the faculty with him. Within a few years of joining ILR, this devoted son, brother, husband, and father—this master of Western European languages, piano, chess board, and the carpentry bench—by virtue of his love of teaching, administrative skill, imagination, discipline, and rigorous scholarship, added luster and developed profound institutional loyalty to Cornell.

John Windmuller was a model of modesty. Unless asked directly about his experiences in wartime France, he usually would not reveal his heroic leadership of other Jewish children seeking shelter in a French orphanage. Indeed, in his public life few would have guessed that before coming to the United States, John's immediate family had personally experienced Kristallnacht, the Dachau concentration camp, the voyage of the St. Louis, the dangers of being Jewish refugees on the run in Nazi Europe, and the tribulations of adjusting to Midwestern American life. Few knew that John was a World War II veteran or that he was active in postwar relief work for children in Europe.

By his own account, John's interest in the field of work and labor came from his experience in personnel administration in the U.S. Army during World War II and from courses taught by Emmett McNatt at the University of Illinois, where he earned a B.A. degree in 1948. He was also influenced by an uncle who, as an attorney, believed the ILR area was an up and coming field. John came to Cornell in January 1948 and wrote his dissertation on the influence of labor unions on American foreign policy, a subject that remained of interest to him throughout his life.

John received his Ph.D. degree from the ILR School in 1951 and joined its faculty that very year. He quickly assumed a central and prominent position in the School and in the field. As a member of the faculty, he was modest and did not seek the limelight. He was quiet and reserved and spoke softly. But, when he spoke, others listened—in part because he thought carefully and deeply about any and all issues, and in part because he was known as a person of unusual sincerity and integrity.

John's leadership was manifest especially in areas of scholarship and teaching. He was a creative, forward-looking scholar who understood the central importance of international/comparative relations in the field. He almost single-handedly made this a central feature of students' education from the early 1950s on. He created the first course on International and Comparative Labor Relations in 1951; when the School established its first

International Institute of Industrial and Labor Relations in the early 1950s, Dean Catherwood appointed him its Director. Directly or indirectly, John bears substantial responsibility for the range of international opportunities offered to our students over the last fifty years. John Windmuller remains “Mr. International” in the history of the ILR School and the field.

In his scholarly career, John Windmuller became the world’s leading expert on comparative labor relations. His work shaped the field and he received many accolades, including a silver medal from the government of the Netherlands for his work in that country. He also played an important role in expanding international work across the university, having been a member of the first Executive Committee of the Cornell Center for International Studies, headed by Mario Einaudi. In acknowledgement of his distinguished scholarship, he was awarded the first Martin P. Catherwood Professorship in the ILR School in 1983.

John’s dedication to scholarship and to the life of the mind was unsurpassed. He was brilliant, rigorous, and analytical. He demonstrated to generations of students and faculty that it was possible to be qualitative and institutional and yet rigorously analytical. He was a disciplined scholar and teacher, who seemed to read everything in the field and take notes on all that he read. John was an old-fashioned scholar: demanding, meticulous, methodical, a bit austere, and a bit severe. But just behind that facade was a warm, generous, and gracious human being, who was unfailingly helpful to young faculty members, and older ones too.

Those of us who joined the faculty after John had become a leading luminary in the ILR School learned three very valuable lessons by watching him on a day-to-day basis. The first is that John was a very active teacher and researcher until his retirement. We learned the importance of remaining professionally active and vital throughout one’s career. Second, when John retired from active teaching and became Professor Emeritus, we were able to benefit from his continued teaching one semester a year for the next several years. John eased gracefully into phased retirement. In that too, he served as a model for us to follow. And third, throughout the years we knew him, John always conducted himself with dignity and grace. He was a model of personal comportment.

When John transitioned from Professor to Professor Emeritus, we missed his daily presence at the School. Later, when he retired fully and could come to campus less and less because of his declining health, we missed him more and more. We continue to miss him today.

Gerd Korman, Edward Lawler, David Lipsky, Gary Fields