In 1973, a Columbia graduate student engaged one of his professors, Andrzej Sulima Kaminski, in a conversation about Richard Nixon. The grad student boldly declared that Nixon would never resign, because he was such a--. Professor Kaminski disagreed, and offered to bet on the outcome. Wagering money seemed unethical, so they agreed on 5 bottles of wine. On my graduate student income, I had to pay out the bottles over several months of 1974, but my judicious selections led to a lifelong friendship. How delightful that, starting in 1985, I was reunited with my old friend on the faculty of Georgetown’s History Department.

Andrzej Sulima Kaminski has lived the life of a 19th-century Romantic hero. Born in Krakow in 1935, he spent the wars years dodging the Gestapo and playing hooky from the guerrilla primary schools run by the Polish Home Army. In 1943, he got a better reason for hooky, when his sister, Maria Magdalena, joined the family. Their parents spent their time in the Home Army. His family life of those years reads like a litany of Nazi atrocities in Poland. Somehow, they survived.

Growing up, Kaminski faced the new challenge of Stalinist Poland. Coming from a “class enemy” family – his maternal grandmother’s family, Czarnecki, is mentioned in the Polish national anthem – and refusing to join the Communist Party, he lost his chance to pursue a life in academe between

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1960 and 1964. After he returned from a year at Stanford on a Ford Foundation grant (1959-60)—developing in San Francisco a love of jazz and the 49ers—the Party banished him to work in a stable (cementing his lifelong love of horses). As conditions thawed in Poland, he returned to his studies, obtaining a doctorate under Professor Josef Gierowski, one of Poland’s greatest historians of the 20th century, at Jagiellonian University in Krakow (1966). He whiled away evening hours playing poker with the local bishop, Karol Wojtyła, later known as Pope John Paul II. His dissertation, on the Sandomierz Confederation of 1706-09, won the prize as the best History thesis in Poland. Twice refused permission to leave Poland for a fellowship at Oxford, he was allowed to leave in 1969 to go to Oxford, without his passport, becoming a stateless person.

From Oxford, he made his way to Columbia University, where he trained many of the leading specialists of early modern Poland: Moshe Rosman (Israel), Gershon Hundert (Canada), and more than a dozen others. While at Columbia, he worked for Broconsult Ltd. as a consultant. Looking for someone whose research could inform land reform in Honduras in the 1970s, Broconsult settled on Andrzej Kaminski, because the latifundial agriculture of 18th-century Poland closely resembled the land tenure arrangements of modern Honduras. After his work in Honduras, Andrzej worked for the Swedish International Development Agency on a water-delivery-to-below-poverty-settlements project in Kenya.

In the early 1980s, Professor Kaminski ran seminars in New York for Polish exiles. Many of those active in Solidarity’s origins participated in these seminars on Polish history and republican traditions: one such participant, who had been one of Solidarity’s main underground publishers, Chris Łazarski, later came to Georgetown and received his Ph.D, in History; he is now a Professor in Poland. Kaminski arrived at Georgetown in 1982, but continued to live in New York, and to run the seminars there. He mentored many outstanding Ph.D.s at Georgetown in his 33 years on our faculty. Between his work at Columbia and at Georgetown, he produced more Ph.D.s in Polish history than any historian outside Poland, over the past half century. In 1990, much to his delight, he returned to his native Poland.

At Georgetown, he produced several major publications, such as Republic versus Autocracy: Poland-Lithuania and Russia in the late Seventeenth Century (Harvard, 1993) and Historia Rzeczypospolitej Wielu Nardów, 1505-1795 (Lublin, 2000). A leading Polish daily newspaper ran a front-page story on the publication of Kaminski’s Historia, which called into question long-held assumptions about early modern Poland. This book was part of an extraordinary project bringing together historians from Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania to create a new series of historical syntheses that would eliminate the old myths and prejudices in each country’s individual historiography.

The Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences recognized his contributions in 1997; at the time of his induction, he was one of only three members of the Academy living outside of Poland (the other two were Professor Peter Wandycz of Yale, and Nobel Prize laureate Czeslaw Milosz). In recognition of his outstanding work as a scholar and mentor on the history of Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, he was named to the Chair of Polish History and Culture at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he spent a semester teaching.

He was one of the driving forces behind the East Central European Scholarship Program (ECESP), which brought community leaders from former Soviet Bloc countries to the US for training in the basics of civic society, from forming labor unions to organizing political parties in a democracy to land reform. In 2008, he received the Kawaler [Knight] in the Order of Polonia Restituta, Poland’s highest civilian honor. He also founded the Institute for Civic Space at Łazarski University in Warsaw, and he helped create its many workshops and fellowships for democracy activists in Belarus and Ukraine.

Beginning in 2006, Kaminski launched the Recovering Forgotten Histories Project, which brings together specialists from East Central Europe and Anglophone authors to discuss the image of Poland and other East Central European countries in Anglophone scholarship. The project began with textbooks, which often contained howling mistakes and even more often repeated outdated and inaccurate generalizations about a part of Europe largely unknown to typical textbook authors (generally historians of England, France, or Germany).

Few historians have had as great an impact on their field as Andrzej Sulima Kaminski has had on studies of early modern Poland. The scholarship of the “Kaminski School” has revolutionized the way historians conceptualize modern research questions. In the field of contemporary politics, his seminars in New York, his efforts to break the hold of nationalistic textbooks, his contribution to ECESP, his sponsorship of training for democratic activists in Belarus and Ukraine, and his ongoing lectures and projects in Poland have also had a dramatic impact. As he leaves us for retirement, he doubtless plans to focus more on his legendary skills as an oenophile, but rumor has it that he will be lecturing in summer 2015 in Poland, trying to instill the values of the Republic in a new generation of young people from East Central Europe.