

William Riegel Schmalstieg, PhD, gentleman and scholar

William Riegel Schmalstieg loving husband, father and grandfather, gentleman and scholar left this world January 22, 2021, surrounded by his loving family. Born in Sayre, Pennsylvania in October 3, 1929, Bill crisscrossed America following the career of his Episcopalian clergy father. Among the many schools he attended, Breck School, where his father was the rector in Minneapolis area, stood out as a highlight. Indeed, Bill regaled his family with tales of the rigorous prep school standards, claiming they were on par with Columbia and Penn, both of which he later attended. Exclaiming Shakespeare quotes such as "Is this a dagger I see before me?" holding a knife for dramatics at the dinner table was a common occurrence, courtesy of Breck's high standards.

Wondering what career to pursue, as a dutiful son he followed his father's dictum to study Russian due to that nation's expanding world role after WWII. After undergraduate school at Univ of Minnesota, Bill received his Master's degree at University of Pennsylvania where he became interested in Lithuanian. Columbia University was his next stop where he met the love of his life and soul partner Emily at a chance meeting at an Episcopalian church where she was in the paid choir. They had a whirlwind courtship and were married by his father at St John the Divine, in New York City.

With the Korean War looming, Bill was commissioned in the Army, and his wide range of language skills (from Arabic to Sanskrit) was put to use teaching languages to counter intelligence officers while stationed in Washington DC. After the war, rather than continue his studies at Columbia, he headed back to Penn where he finished his PhD in linguistics.

Following several appointments at various universities, Bill settled at Penn State University in 1964 until his retirement in 2001 as a Sparks Professor emeritus of Slavic and Baltic Linguistics and head of the Department of Slavic Languages. His teaching concentrated on Slavic linguistics, Russian, Old Church Slavic as well as courses in Baltic languages and linguistics, primarily Lithuanian.

His wide range of publications and books resulted in speaking invitations to many international linguistic conferences. He made several trips to the Soviet Union during the Cold War period when few Americans were permitted entry and thus came under the suspicious eye of the feared KGB, the Soviet Secret Police. After the breakup of the Soviet Union when Lithuania regained its independence in 1991, the Lithuanian government officially honored Professor Schmalstieg for his accomplishments in the study of the Lithuanian language.

Despite his many published books and scholarly accomplishments, Bill would say his family and friends were the real pleasure and focus of his life. An excellent conversationalist, Bill had quite a repertoire of stories, such as recalling the eerie coyote howls of his youth in South Dakota, driving a taxi up New Hampshire's Mount Washington as a college freshman summer job and seeing planes circle below him, playing mental chess with fellow classmates as he worked a summer job for the Minnesota highway dept. or taking walks in Moscow parks to talk to Soviet intellectuals out of the surveillance of KGB agents. He shared a love of music with Emily but was ready to admit his talent there was lacking as demonstrated when he would sing Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, or croon spectacularly off key to his musician wife, "A Bicycle Built for Two."

Bill loved his daughters Linda Shorey and Roxanne Bolinger and often would whisper to them how lucky he was also to have such wonderful sons-in-law Bruce and Jim. The grandchildren Caleb Bolinger and Serena (Bolinger) Chamness (and spouse James) were exceptional lights and when they were young, he was the reliable playmate donning a Captain Hook outfit and sword. His golden retriever grand dogs were much loved and depended upon to tuck him into bed as his health failed. Indeed he faced the indignities of old age and failing health with great aplomb, often concocting slightly off color puns for his wonderful caregivers. His sense of humor and engagement was evident to all who came in contact with him. Emily was the true love of his life and their 68-year marriage, packed with adventure, education and travel, was exceptional.

Towards the end of his life when caught staring off in the distance with his beautiful blue eyes and asked what he was thinking, his answer invariably was "I am meditating on the beauty of the universe." Let us all join him in peace and do the same.

At this time there are no plans for a memorial service. In lieu of flowers, a contribution may be made in his name to [Breck School](#), 123 Ottawa Ave N, Golden Valley, MN 55422. Condolence cards may be sent to 573 Red Maple Way, Lancaster, Pa 17603.