



Milton Pikarsky

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1924-1989

By Anton Tedesko

Milton Pikarsky was born March 28, 1924, in New York City and he died on June 15, 1989, of a heart attack in Washington, D.C., on one of his countless trips to participate in professional meetings. His home was in Yonkers, New York, his office at the City University of New York (CUNY). Most of his adult life was spent in Chicago, where his name is identified with some of the outstanding achievements in public works and transportation.

Pikarsky was a talented, experienced, productive, hardworking civil engineer, a most dedicated public servant; he provided leadership in public positions of trust and responsibility. An expert in substance as well as in procedure, he had the initiative, the opportunity, and the authority to get things done. The challenge of his job, the opportunity to serve, inspired and drove him to excellence. He viewed his work as a service to the region and to the people of that region. He found his reward in that knowledge.

His parents were immigrants from Moldavia, now one of the Soviet socialist republics. They settled in New York City and led a rather frugal life, working hard in their candy store, later in their hat shop; they made sacrifices so that their children would have what they lacked: a good education. Milton was influenced and impressed by his mother. She and his family experience, public schools,

and the City College of New York shaped his thinking and values. He was committed to the need for education and research to enable engineers to make contributions to the community, which he believed were their professional responsibility. He was used to making a serious study of whatever engaged his active mind. He served as personal or professional mentor to many of those with whom he came in contact.

Pikarsky graduated from City College in 1944 with a degree in civil engineering and went to work for the New York Central Railroad. With World War II still going on, he soon took a leave of absence to serve in the U.S. Navy. Following military service, he spent ten years with the railroad as assistant engineer in Chicago; during some of that time he was in charge of the reconstruction of the LaSalle Street Station. In 1956 he became a partner in the firm of Plumb, Tuckett & Pikarsky, specializing in the design and construction of highway and railroad bridges.

In 1960 he began his official relationship with the city of Chicago, which would soon make him a key figure in Chicago's public works history. The administration of Mayor Richard J. Daley was a critical period of growth and change for the city. The challenge of building and rebuilding required people of engineering and administrative talents, and the Mayor attracted and recruited a nationally respected professional staff. He had first noticed Pikarsky's ability when Pikarsky was an enthusiastic member of the team designing and building the east end of the Congress Expressway underneath the Main Post Office and the LaSalle Street Station. Pikarsky brought his unbelievable optimism, energy, and dedication to this challenging project.

At the age of thirty-six, Pikarsky was picked by Daley to be the engineer of public works for the city of Chicago, and was regarded as one of the mayor's most competent and trusted cabinet members. Four years later, at age forty, he was picked to serve as Chicago's youngest commissioner of public works. During his tenure, he supervised more

than \$1 billion in public works construction, including the expansion of O'Hare Airport, the construction of the Water Purification Plant, the building of the Adlai Stevenson Expressway, the extension of rapid transit lines, and the construction of many sewers and bridges. His Northwest Incinerator was an early example of a waste-to-energy facility. The Sears Tower, the world's tallest building, might have been two smaller buildings if it had not been for Pikarsky's critical role and intervention in arranging for all the technical clearances needed to assure this tower's feasibility.

Pikarsky was elected Chicago's Engineer of the Year; at times he was the focus of critical attention of the public and the media. Numerous times he was on the verge of being "fired" when he insisted on doing what he thought was the right thing professionally, and not what local politicians demanded. The mayor was on his side and backed him in the face of political pressure. But, at times the mayor hid behind Pikarsky or conveniently made him the scapegoat when the mayor had difficulties with members of his own party.

On occasion, Pikarsky experienced great disappointment when his plans fell victim to party politics. He had proudly assembled a talented interdisciplinary team of engineers, architects, and planners that came up with many innovative features for the design of the Crosstown Expressway; this road was to allow traffic on the interstate to bypass downtown Chicago. The project became a political football, and was cancelled when a candidate for the election of governor demanded that the project be killed. The only portion saved was what is now known as the Kennedy Expressway with its extension to O'Hare airport.

It was during this period that Pikarsky earned an M.S. in civil engineering at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), where years later he became a faculty member.

In 1973 Pikarsky was elected to the National Academy of Engineering (NAE), and he was confirmed as chairman of the Chicago Transit Authority. As Mayor Daley's chief

transportation expert, Pikarsky's reputation and influence were felt on the national scene. He was a tireless advocate of federal support for urban transit and worked with the staffs of congressmen in Washington on changes in public works legislation. He was instrumental in moving legislation towards enactment for equitable treatment of persons displaced by federally assisted programs. It was a high point of satisfaction for Pikarsky when President Nixon signed the bill that provided a ten-fold increase in the capital funding for transit. Pikarsky had conceived, drafted, and worked in Washington on this and other bills that were strongly supported by the Illinois congressional representatives mobilized by Pikarsky.

Pikarsky was active and held offices in many organizations, such as the American Public Works Association (APWA), and the National League of Cities and its Steering Committee on Transportation. He substituted for Richard Daley at the U.S. Conference of Mayors, was chairman of committees on urban transportation goals and objectives, and on mass transportation; he was president of the Western Society of Engineers, and chairman of its Transportation Division.

His approach to transit was regional and bipartisan. He played a major role on a task force set up by the Republican governor, which in 1975 led to the formation of the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA). After political infighting, Pikarsky was selected as its first chairman. The RTA had jurisdiction over four counties (Republican and Democratic); it operated like a government and had taxing authority. Pikarsky thus became the czar of the regional commuter railroads, the rapid transit system, and the city's and suburban bus lines. A regional gasoline tax was designed to discourage commuters from driving to work.

Milton Pikarsky was married in 1947 to Sally Nessel; they had two children, Amy and Joel. Milton's habit of working fourteen to sixteen hours every day was not conducive to a balanced family life. Sally came down with a long, serious illness and was confined to a hospital where Milton visited

her daily until her full recovery. In 1975 by amicable agreement, Milton and Sally parted. Milton moved to an apartment where his commuting time between home and office was reduced to a few minutes. After years of a life filled with professional work, he came rather late to the realization that it was also necessary for him to have a personal life—and the children to whom he was devoted became one of his priorities.

More and more Milton became involved in transportation research and he lectured regularly on transportation subjects at the University of Illinois and at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In 1978 he resigned from the RTA in view of the political changes that had taken place in Chicago. He joined the Research Institute of IIT and devoted a considerable amount of time to bring his public works experience to bear on the curriculum. The graduate program he developed received official recognition.

In his 1977 seminars at the Chicago Campus of the University of Illinois, he was assigned a bright, young graduate assistant, Christine Johnson from Laramie, Wyoming, who was finishing her Ph.D. in planning. Milton became her adviser, mentor, and colleague. They were married in 1978, and for the eleven years until his death, they were each other's best friend.

On assignment from the World Bank, Pikarsky reviewed transportation structures in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. He became a member of an international team serving the economic minister of Argentina. Similar assignments involved entering the planning process and expanding public transit systems in the United States and Canada. Pikarsky participated in international conferences and transportation assignments in European countries, as well as in Australia.

On a two-week transportation tour of the Soviet Union, arranged by the U.S. Department of Transportation, he covered numerous republics and cities; on his own he roamed the Moscow subway, where he took dozens of photos of small children and then presented each of these smiling

and wide-eyed children with the Polaroid picture just taken—a dramatic novelty. This was characteristic of his compassion and warm human qualities.

Pikarsky was busy in Washington, as a member of the National Research Council's (NRC) Transportation Research Board (TRB) from 1974 to 1978, and as a member of the TRB Executive Committee from 1982 to 1989; he served as chairman of the TRB from 1975 to 1976. He chaired the Committee for NRC Oversight for seven years, ensuring that TRB's activities conformed to NRC standards and guidelines. Pikarsky's dedication and energies through many years with TRB were recognized by the W. N. Carey, Jr. Distinguished Service Award (1988).

Here are several of his many other honors: the Urban Administration Award of IIT (1968); the Townsend Harris Medal of the City College of New York (1969); the James Laurie Prize (1977) and the Civil Government Award (1973), both from the American Society of Civil Engineers of which Pikarsky was a fellow; and the Meritorious Service Award of the APWA (1984). He was declared one of the Ten Top Public Works Leaders of the Year by the APWA (1969).

Pikarsky was active in an unbelievably large number of professional, academic, industrial, and civic organizations. Within a dozen years, he held office in twenty organizations including chairmanship of six subcommittees of NRC. He was chairman of NRC's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Impact Program Advisory Committee and a member of its Committee on Public Engineering Policy; and a member of NAE's Awards Committee and of its Civil Engineering Peer Committee. Pikarsky kept up with friends at city, county, state, and federal levels. He wrote or coauthored sixty-seven articles and two professional books; his papers were on technical subjects and on questions of policy.

At IIT in Chicago, he pursued efforts to coordinate transportation research activities of several universities. He planned, with several other universities, to establish an Institute of Transportation Systems (ITS) at IIT; his entrepre

neurial flair helped him to convince people that his plans should be executed. However, IIT was not in a position financially to start any new ventures, so Pikarsky looked elsewhere for the realization of his dreams.

The key figures in Chicago public works considered Milton Pikarsky their leader, a colleague, a friend, a mentor, and a member of their family. But first and foremost, they considered him a builder. When asked about the secret of success, Pikarsky replied that while ability certainly helps, what really counts are persistence, willingness to take risks, and good luck. He added that his secret of being lucky was to give oneself enough chances to be lucky by trying things and taking risks. Sometimes the result might be exposure to situations that might not be pleasant, but at other times the result might be "good luck".

All along Pikarsky felt indebted to the City College of New York for having given him an excellent education, tuition-free; he felt, therefore, an obligation to give of himself to the new generation studying at what is now the City University of New York. This institution that gave him his start in life asked him in 1985 to return as a distinguished professor of civil engineering, and to set up a transportation research institute. He believed he owed it to the institution; so he came back to his alma mater, leaving Chicago and friends after more than forty years, and moved to New York where he was relatively unknown. He bought a house in Yonkers and his wife, Christine, became director of Transportation Planning for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

Milton enjoyed making repairs around the house and on the car. They both worked late in their offices and had hurried dinners on weekdays after returning home together; on Sundays Milton enjoyed cooking dinners or taking trips in their trailer camper.

At CUNY, Pikarsky helped establish and became the head of the Institute of Transportation Systems; he organized and became the executive director of a Transportation Re

search Consortium, in which twelve universities of the eastern United States (including Columbia, Cornell, and Princeton) jointly conducted research, training, and technology transfer. At the same time, he filled what may be called another full-time job as director of Engineering Studies for the National Council of Public Works Improvement, a Washington assignment commissioned by the President and by the Congress. Pikarsky inspired staff members to strive for excellence; during this evaluation, he counseled and supported them through difficulty. He selflessly gave guidance and advice on the condition of public works in the United States, resulting in recommendations to the President and to the Congress. At the same time, on yet another full-time assignment, he served as a consultant on problems nationwide, was a consultant to the commissioner of Transportation of New York State, and kept up his active membership on numerous committees engaged in a variety of engineering causes.

Milton Pikarsky was a kind, compassionate, and caring person, personally modest, an optimist with vision and faith, integrity, and tenacity. He felt obligated to help people and enjoyed doing so. He took young people under his wing. It never occurred to him that some might not like what he was doing; when people opposed him, he never doubted their good intentions or motives.

Pikarsky became a civic statesman, using quiet determined efforts; he loved challenges and thrived on difficult assignments. He saw public service as the highest calling. Looking back at his professional life, it could be said that he had the mind of an imaginative technocrat and the heart of an idealist.

He is survived by his wife Christine Johnson, who has been appointed assistant commissioner of transportation for New Jersey, and his children Amy (in Los Angeles) and Joel (in Ft. Collins, Colorado).

