

## Anatole Beck: Meritorious Service

Lydia Zepeda<sup>1</sup>, April 27, 2021

Anatole Beck was known as the conscience of the university. About many things, he said, *“I knew I had to speak up, because no one else would.”* He was a fixture in the UW Madison faculty senate. However, first and foremost he was a mathematician, a proud father, and a union leader. He was also a pilot, a social thinker, a defender of civil liberties, and a radio personality.

Anatole was born March 19, 1930 in New York City to a union family. Both his parents were Jews who came from the western edge of what was the Russian Empire. They met in New York where they sought a better life, free from antisemitism. His mother, Minnie Rosenblum came from Brest, which became part of Poland, and is now a principal city of Belarus. She arrived before the law in 1922 restricting immigration. Anatole’s father, Morris Beck, came from Kovno in Lithuania, which is now called Kaunas. He had been captured by the Germans in WWI and was put in a labor battalion. He used the name and papers of another man to come to the US. In the US he changed his last name from Bekovich to Beck. He worked as a furrier, while Anatole’s mother was a seamstress. Both were involved in unions.

Anatole’s parents moved to Russia in 1931 due to the Depression, hoping for better employment. But things were worse in Russia than New York City. They were able to return to the US in 1933 because Anatole was a US citizen. They lived in the Workers’ Cooperative Colony, a landmark in the Bronx, a cooperative of garment and other workers. All their neighbors and friends were radicals and some were communists. His brother Bernie described it as,



**Anatole’s parents and Anatole as a child**  
(courtesy E.-L. Siegel Beck)

*“We were all red diaper babies, the children of communists and leftists who carried those progressive and working class values to fight poverty and inequality even after communism in the Soviet Union was revealed to have failed. We carried those values to Wisconsin*

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*which had the reputation until recently of being progressive and a liberal place due to the legacy of Bob La Follette.”*

Anatole put it this way, *“Socialism was popular among Jews because they were desperate for emancipation and they knew they would never be emancipated until everyone was emancipated.”*

The Depression was an era of union strife. Anatole recalled that when he was six, his father was arrested often on the picket line. As Jewish New Yorkers with working class values, his family was not religious, but culturally attached to Eastern Europe. As his son Micah put it, *“My father was an atheist, but unionism was the closest thing he had to a religion.”* Anatole’s family valued education and culture.

When he was quite young, Anatole was trouble maker who did not fit in. Testing revealed he was simply bored in school, so they gave him more challenging work. Anatole’s brother Bernie was born when Anatole was 8 years old. Their father died at age 46, when Anatole (just 11 years old) became like a father to his three year old brother, Bernie. Their mother quit her factory job and used the death benefit she received to buy a newsstand so that she could be within shouting distance of her boys. She made a deal with Anatole that if he kept out of trouble and studied, she would be the activist in the family.

At age 12 or 13 Anatole wanted to be an inventor. However, he realized he would not be able to because he was poor, too clumsy to make anything, and he was not a good salesman of his ideas. Although he put that fantasy aside, many years later he realized that being a mathematician made him an inventor of ideas, and that he enjoyed inventing solutions to social problems. Whenever he came across a problem, he asked himself, what would he do, how would he solve that? However, he claims he never did learn to be a good salesman of his ideas.

Anatole went to Stuyvesant High School, one of two magnet college preparatory public high schools in New York, known for its math program. It was all boys; girls were not admitted until 1969. Following his mother’s advice, he steered clear of politics, but one day he was walking home, and there was a union or leftist demonstration. It turned violent, he was hit on the head, knocked down, and arrested. It turned out someone had taken a picture of him and his arms were full of books. Since he could not have done what the police said he did, they let him go.

After graduating in 1947, he went to Brooklyn College, although most people in the Bronx went to City College in Manhattan. When he finished his mathematics degree in 1951, he went to Yale for his PhD. He was among the first working class Jews to attend Yale. He went to Madison, Wisconsin for the first time in the summer of 1952 on a Yale fellowship; UW-Madison was one of two universities in the country at the time that offered regular summer courses, not just remedial classes for those who had flunked a course. He took two courses and audited another. Anatole took Game Theory because he was interested in how it applied to social problems. He went back to UW-

Madison the following summer, but failed to get a third fellowship because by that time he was expending too much effort, as he put it, “wooing” a girl in South Brooklyn.

While he did a good job at Yale, he was not at the top of his class and was not considered sufficiently driven. He did however marry the girl, Evelyn Torton (Beck) in 1954. They had a daughter Nina Rachel Beck in 1955. Anatole completed his dissertation in 1956 while teaching at Williams College. He applied for a job at IBM, to work on an early form of AI. It would have been a career move that would have taken him into industry and prevented an academic career. He interviewed, but was very unsure about going into the corporate world. He told IBM to wait, he wasn't ready to consider an offer. At some point he sent IBM a telegram, “*So all right already, make me an offer.*” As his son Micah put it,

*“He did that on purpose because if they could not handle that, they could not handle him. He told me it was a test of the world to see if they were ready for him.”*

IBM did not make him an offer and later Anatole said it was the best thing that ever happened to him because he eventually got a job at UW-Madison and became an academic. He had a postdoc at Tulane where he worked on publishing his dissertation and also became interested in a mathematical problem that had not been solved. During 1957-8 he was in Europe on a Yale fellowship where he tried to prove the strong law of large numbers and produced a counterexample. He recalled giving a lecture in Paris in terrible French, including a lot of pointing to the formulas on the board. This topic was his first publication after his dissertation.

In April 1958 he was offered a job at UW–Madison. He remembered how beautiful it was because he had spent two summers there and had learned to sail there. While most academics go away for the summer, he thought it was the most glorious season at Madison. He described UW–Madison as an Eden then, saying it had more to offer than Harvard or Berkeley because it was innovative, had the heritage of Bob La Follette, WARF, the Experiment station, and it had a self-governing faculty, which was unique in the US.

*“It later became known as faculty governance, then mixed governance, then later on, after the merger (of the UW system), it was called shared governance. Since the merger, the Regents have made the claim that their share of shared governance is 100%.”*

The family moved to Madison and lived in faculty housing. His department did not tell him what to teach, but allowed him to lobby for courses. Their son Micah Daniel was born in 1958. During the summer of 1960, he went to Cornell, where he worked with Jacob Wolfowitz, the father of Paul Wolfowitz who was later in the Defense department. He and Jacob agreed on nothing, but were good friends.

As an assistant professor, Anatole recalled he had gotten into a discussion with Dean Ingraham who did not see any reason why the university should pay a math professor any more than a French professor. Anatole told him he agreed with him, that the university ought to pay a French professor the same as what it cost to get a good math professor.

After 4 years at Wisconsin, Anatole thought it was time to be promoted, but UW–Madison did not, until he was offered an associate professorship at Northwestern. Madison made a counter offer including tenure. Northwestern then raised its salary offer, but Anatole refused and stayed at Madison.

*“I was happy to stay, I had friends. The only regret I have about not taking that offer is that a few years later my brother Bernie was offered an assistant professorship at Northwestern in sociology and I would have liked to have been there with him.”*

In 1964-65 he went on sabbatical in Israel. He went back to working on his “big book” with his post docs Myrtle (who went by Mirit) and Jonathan Lewin, “*Continuous flow in the plane.*” Of this work, he said, “*I didn’t solve the question I set out to solve, but I moved it far along.*”



**Day of the Dead Ofrenda of Anatole (E.-L. Siegel Beck)**

Anatole continued to focus on his work. While he had joined the Local 223 of the American Federation of Teachers in 1962, he was not active in politics either on or off campus. That changed in the spring of 1967 when his mother died of cancer.

*"I realized I had been behaving like a child. I had let her carry the load for the family. I suddenly realized that I was the head of the family and I could no longer hide under cover of the deal with my mother when I saw things that I thought were bad."*



Initially he had not been against the Vietnam war and did not support the student tactics, but when it became clear that what the students said and what the police said were different, he decided that faculty needed to act as witnesses. He organized faculty and told them their testimony might be needed. He witnessed the "Dow Riots" of October 18, 1967 in the Commerce Building (now Ingraham Hall). What began as a peaceful student demonstration against Dow Chemical (makers of napalm) recruiting on campus, ended with scores of injuries after the Madison police were called. Anatole was standing on the stairs:

**Anatole and Nina campaigning for Eugene McCarthy** (Courtesy E.-L. Siegel Beck)

*"The police came into the Commerce building. They pushed at the crowd at the eastern end. The 100 students pushed back to the door. I heard glass breaking, it was the front door. I do not know who broke it. The police came charging back and began beating the students brutally."*

That Wednesday night, while students debated whether to strike the following day, President Fred Harvey Harrington, Chancellor William Sewell, Dean of Students Kauffman, and Chief Ralph Hanson gathered at Kauffman's house on Celia Court on the far west side to prepare for an all faculty meeting the next day (Sklar, 1970). The students called a general student strike for the following day, and over 3000 students rallied on Bascom Hill. That same Thursday there was a faculty meeting at Union Theater where Sewell thought he could wrap things up quickly. The meeting lasted seven hours without any resolution. Over 80% of the faculty showed up. Students were outside on the terrace listening to a broadcast of the meeting. Anatole was one of many faculty who spoke. He considered Chancellor Sewell a good friend, but said that Sewell had not been there while Anatole had, and that what Sewell told the faculty was what he had been told to say. Anatole recalled hearing a roar from the students on the

Terrace after he spoke and that it scared the faculty. He described his attitude as naive in that he had faith that the word of the faculty would be believed. Anatole was convinced that Sewell was being manipulated into condemning the students by the Dean of Students, Joseph Kauffman, who Anatole said had been working in intelligence in Moscow before coming to Madison.

*“I had no dog in that fight. [After I spoke] my reputation was gone. I became the notorious Anatole Beck. I realized that there are times you have to say things, so I do.... I told the faculty what I saw. Before this event I was just a professor of mathematics.”*

A decision at the faculty meeting was postponed until the following Monday while a few faculty worked furiously to craft a compromise between the faculty groups that most of the faculty could accept (Sklar, 1970). The following Monday, the majority of the faculty voted on a compromise which upset the students. As his son Micah, put it,

*“Professors are people who get where they are by getting A’s. They are by and large people who do not question, they find out what is expected of them and do that. So there is a tendency to be manipulated, by trying to be in the good graces of whoever is in charge. This can be held over you.”*

After this, Professor Beck became more active, though he seldom participated in protests. His son recalled that they had a peace sign on their door, much to the chagrin of their conservative neighbors. Anatole began to speak out against the war,

*“The one thing I could do was try to convince people why the war in Vietnam was hopeless and why it would only result in deaths. The choice was to continue to fight until we realized we were fighting a losing battle. You cannot fight a nationalist movement that has the support of the people.... The one outrageous thing I was willing to do is speak the truth as I knew it.”*

He chose to support others, even when he did not particularly like their causes or approach. He did this because he saw value in freedom of speech and in dissent. He felt that having a docile population led to revolutions and he never wanted to live through a revolution. He felt that when it was impossible to express oneself, when one was expected to obey in silence, when revolutions were deemed “impossible,” that was when it was most dangerous, and a revolution most likely. He viewed revolutions as dangerous because while they were motivated by having a common enemy, everyone wanted different things from a revolution, hence they would inevitably fail. His son Micah learned from him,

*“If you know your strengths and who you are, that is your source of personal power and that translates into groups of people. Much of what people don’t do is they are taught not to speak up, it is beaten out of them. That is a form of oppression. People don’t know their own strength or are convinced not to use it.”*

Close to home, his defense of civil liberties hit a stumbling block. His daughter Nina who had been organizing student actions at her High School to free Angela Davis, among other things, came out in 1971. She was only 16 and this was a time when few adults, let alone teens, came out. Anatole was not supportive; he tried to argue with her that her life would be difficult. Unsurprisingly, she dropped out of high school, moved out, and found support within a house of college students. She would go on to be a leader in LGBTQ+ rights, as one of the couples who fought for and won marriage equality in the state of Vermont. Anatole was proud of her activism and her achievements.

In 1972, he was elected to the University Committee, but only served a year because he took a job at the London School of Economics (LSE). He went to LSE because he wanted to work on social issues. He saw the value of mathematical approaches to problem solving, despite taking issue with economists mathematizing economics and applying game theory by making unrealistic assumptions. *“The weakness in mathematical economics lies not in the analysis of the models, which is excellent, but in the nature of the models themselves.”* He took his son Micah with him. He loved the job, and planned to stay. However, he returned to Madison after two years because of a divorce with his first wife. Making less than 8000 pounds a year, he simply did not earn enough at LSE to comply with the terms of their divorce. The breakup of the family was difficult for him. Family was such an important part of his identity.



**Anatole the pilot** (courtesy E.-L. Siegel Beck)

After he returned to Madison, he was asked to stand for election as vice president of the Wisconsin Federation of Teachers (WFT). He served for 8 years. United Faculty and Staff (UFAS) had joined the WFT in the early 70s. UFAS in the 60s had mostly faculty members, about 200, and had been largely focused on anti-war activities until then. When it joined with AFT, it lost about half of its members because they were not interested in collective bargaining. Anatole and Jim Donnelly in History were instrumental in negotiating a lower percent of dues paid to WFT by Madison (Local 223). They felt it was crucial for recruitment. However, between the pushback from other universities on the lower per caps paid by Madison and the ire Anatole

incurred from the Teaching Assistants Associations (TAA) because he felt the faculty should run the university, Anatole was ousted from WFT leadership.

Around 1980 he and Jim Donnelly founded Wisconsin University Union (WUU) as an alternative to UFAS/WFT. While many faculty were members of both UFAS and WUU, WUU focused on promoting shared governance and academic freedom, attracting faculty and staff opposed to collective bargaining, as well as the faculty and staff opposed to UFAS paying a high percentage of their dues to WFT. WUU dues were about \$5 a month through payroll. This mechanism was abolished by Act 10 in 2010, reducing membership for all unions throughout Wisconsin. However, in its early years, WUU had about 120 members, a little larger than UFAS at the time. Anatole and Jim Donnelly, who both served as WUU presidents, felt that eventually faculty would come around to collective bargaining. In the meantime, Anatole fought the erosion of shared governance. It was often lonely and frustrating work, made all the more difficult by Governor Tommy Thompson's appointments to the Board of Regents who wanted to run the University like a business.

Anatole became involved in protecting due process and employment rights of faculty. He felt he had to speak up because no one else would. While his activities did not affect his relationships in mathematics, they did divert his attention from mathematics. He always retained his interest in problem solving whether the problems were mathematical or social.

*"The paradoxical things in mathematics are what give it its wonder. 100 years ago, all calculations were done by people, now only machines are trusted, but there are some calculations that cannot be done by machines. The problem with mathematics is, we are training people to be machines. I teach mathematics to engage imagination, some students are annoyed, many faculty are annoyed. I have evolved to a scholar who advocates contemplation."*

He met his second wife, Eve-Lynn Siegel (Beck), in May of 1998. She was cousins with Michael Bleicher, one of Anatole's longtime friends. She had heard about Anatole from Michael for many years. On their first date, she asked him if he was the person people thought he was.

*"He said, you will have to find out. He both was and wasn't. People thought he was a kook, to some degree, true. People thought he was a communist, definitely not. People thought he was a socialist, that's correct. My family also was socialist. We were 18 years apart [in age], so we didn't have a lot of actual experiences in common, but had a lot of similar experiences and values."*

Eve found that they also had in common the way they referred to their brothers. Anatole referred to his brother as the smartest man he knew and that is how Eve referred to her brother. She found married life was somewhat regimented by Anatole's habits. He preferred to go to activist events by himself, so he could talk to his buddies. Indeed, many people did not know they were a couple and were surprised to see them



together. He walked to campus. He even walked during his lectures. When she videotaped one of his lectures, he wrote the proofs in his right hand and erased them with his left hand. She described how Anatole was awake in the middle of the night quite often, saying that it was a great time to have a conversation, but sometimes he was too busy to talk.



**Anatole & Eve-Lynn Siegel Beck** (courtesy E.-L. Siegel Beck)

*“He would be staring at the ceiling and I asked him, is the answer up there? And he would say, of course, now let me think.” (laughs)*

One of the many things he contemplated was the economic value of knowledge. He wrote a book called “The Knowledge Business” which he published on the internet in 1996. He argued that all of us benefit from the knowledge developed before us, but none of us pay for it, therefore it was crucial to invest in education and innovation since it was a public good.

*“I seem to have been the only one at the time who thought the knowledge business is not a millstone around society, but an immensely profitable business, paying back a huge multiple of what it costs. [This is despite] almost all the money spent is wasted because most of what we teach is not learned and most of what is learned is forgotten, most of the research we do is inconclusive, and most of what is conclusive merely verifies what we knew before.”*

He felt the public had been persuaded to disinvest in education. He thought those who benefited most were the wealthy whose enterprises relied on all the knowledge created and therefore they should pay taxes to subsidize education and innovation from preschool to higher education. He argued for universal preschools to ensure not just adequate stimulation, but adequate nutrition. He advocated for greater leisure and a universal basic income from what he called the “knowledge dividend” from all past knowledge and innovation. He argued against overtime for some and unemployment for other. He predicted that, unchecked, companies would offer little stability, longer hours and create a global economy of “exoslavery,” [where the conditions of slavery could be moved to other countries.

*“The exporting of low-wage and/or high-risk jobs to the desperately poor people of the developing world is not an act of charity. It is a way to reduce the workers of the industrialized world to the same level of penury. It is a mechanism for breaking the unions, of setting workers at each others' throats in search for the remaining jobs.”*

He condemned economists for calling this rational and free trade. He predicted increases in underemployment, homelessness, a rise in TB, and disinvestment in basic research, among other things. He also called for a tax on security transactions, now called a Tobin tax.

*“A more sober market, less attractive for gambling, would be more useful in promoting the productive functions which are always adduced for maintaining a free market in securities. Of course, the volume of trading would diminish greatly, stocks would cease to be a place for holding money in the short run, and the need for talented and well-educated people in what amounts to a huge gaming house would be lessened.”*

He attributed the growth in the economy to knowledge, not the market, saying,

*“The market was an impediment to growth, and only on the most outrageous terms was invention to find investment there....The official line in the economics departments is that it was the Free Market which produced the wonders, and it was government which was the impediment. For this, they have no evidence....We are not bound by the laws of nature to a system which wastes so much of our industrial capacity and most of our labor, which decrees that a minority will work too much and most will not work at all. We can devise solutions, and even devise [them] so that most of the solutions will work. We need to yoke our intelligences to that task, but we will not do so while we are ourselves constrained by an ideology which is tailored to the greed of the rich.”*



**Samuel Walker Beck (Michah's son), Anatole, Bernard, & Micah Beck** (courtesy E.-L. Siegel Beck)

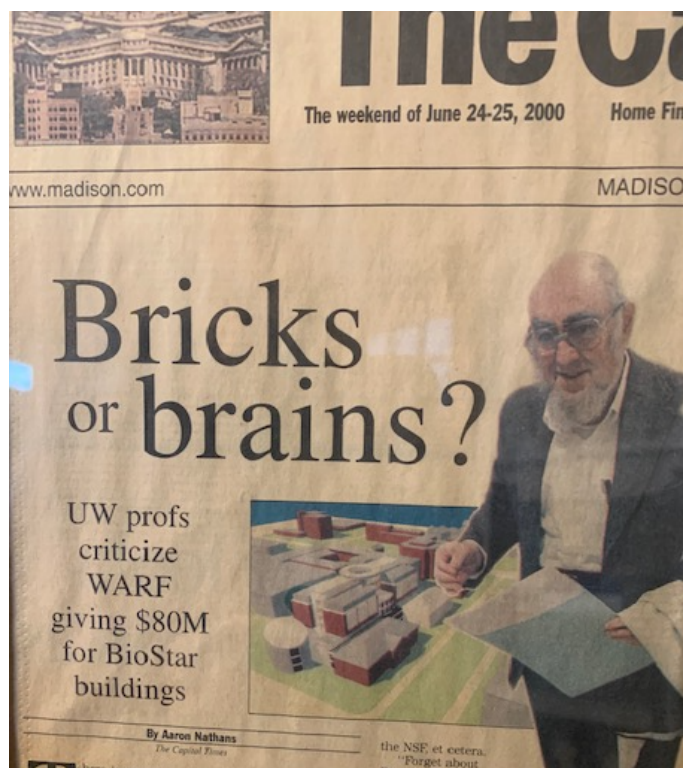
Anatole liked to argue. His friend Steve Bauman recalls, *“When I was most angry at him, I would go sit in a room for 10 minutes and realize that goddammit, he is right.”* He and his brother Bernie, who is a sociologist, often had discussions about making the

world better, with Bernie often pointing out the obstacles to implementing Anatole's ideas. Like Eve, Bernie observed that Anatole would suddenly go quiet and stare into a corner. He was doing math in his spare time. Anatole found solving problems and pushing frontiers exciting. He was struck by the fact that before something is known it is exciting, and after it is common knowledge it is not interesting in the same way. He felt scholarship had to be exciting; if it was drudgery, it did no one any good.

He also had a lot of ideas regarding social problems, but did not know how to implement them. He would make appointments with government officials to explain his ideas. They humored him and then showed him the door. For example, Anatole advocated for free bus fare in Madison, decades before others proposed this, saying it was only fair to the poor who needed, but could least afford, transportation. He argued that it would save equipment, time, and money to dispense with ticket collection and accounting, making busses more efficient. He felt a free bus system would instill civic pride and be an adornment to the community. He also wrote plans for enclosed cities and desalination canals. His son Micah said, *"His ideas seemed brilliant, but I would tell him, and he knew it, no one was going to pay attention to him because he was not part of their community."*

Anatole was disappointed as academia became subject to corporate influence and students were no longer interested in playing with ideas. He understood that economic pressures made students pragmatic, but he still wanted them to engage their minds. As his brother Bernie put it,

*"When he explained a theory, he would put step 1 and step 23 to begin with, and then filled the blackboards with all the intervening steps. A student came up and said, 'The book does this in two steps.' His reply was, 'Yes, but that doesn't teach you anything about the underlying principles. When you do it this way, it teaches you everything important about the field. The side issues are the most important part.' It is not the students' fault that they want to know what is on the test, we have*



**Cap Times Front Page, June 24-25, 2000**  
(courtesy E.-L. Siegel Beck)

*imposed grade orientation on students and we are the ones giving out the grades....  
Students are very interested in learning, but their education gets in the way."*

Anatole was well aware that the way to get ahead in academia was to solve a problem that others had not been able to solve, to get a name for yourself and then "turn the crank" for the rest of one's career. He knew that very few academics continued to break new ground, but that is what he aspired to. He was a great believer in the Enlightenment. As his son Micah put it,

*"You may fail or have no success or may pay for, but the right thing to do is to...  
push the boundaries of knowledge. There are no guarantees you will be rewarded,  
but that is what we should do."*

Anatole was proud of his children, his brother, his work, his students, his activism, and being able to discuss complex social problems in two minutes on Radio Kiosk on WORT. Being a professor was his identity, but that meant more than simply searching for knowledge; it meant trying to find solutions to social problems and speaking up for the rights of others. He was in the faculty senate from its inception until he retired, more than 30 years. However, while he was happy when he was recognized for his activism, he did not expect to be validated. Just like his telegram to IBM, he felt it was more like a test for the rest of the world to see if they valued what he did.

*"I am a very self-indulgent person. I do what I want to do. If I don't feel like doing, I don't do it. You would think by [age] 79 I would have gotten over that juvenile approach. I am happy that I have been able to do what I wanted to do. I haven't been a success by ordinary standards, I am the poorest paid full professor in my department. But I have been a success by my standards."*

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