Eric A. Belgrad, Personal Memories
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Abstract: A short essay commemorating the life of Dr. Belgrad.

Eric Belgrad, in my judgment, was not a particularly religious man in an institutional sense. I never thought of him as someone who regularly attended synagogue or even at all. I can say that after our first meeting in 1978, when I was an aspiring college instructor, he was a man of great learning and wisdom (there is a difference). He reminded me of some of the great teachers in the Jewish Hasidic tradition, the pious ones or “rebbe,” who taught the truths of humanity or, in other words, how to live a virtuous life. Thirty-five years ago, Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel wrote a book about these men with their “souls on fire,” a term that embodies the impassioned mind and spirit: Eric Belgrad was indeed a soul on fire.

Everything he did—from his classroom instruction to chairing Political Science at Towson University for over 20 years to fostering, and then promoting, the character of the department—he achieved with the zeal and strength of a man with a passionate and fiery vision. He arrived at the department in 1966 as a young man. By the time of his death nearly 50 years later, he had taught and counseled thousands of students: his personality and intellect inspired all of them, and all of us who teach here. How do I know this? The answer is both simple and complicated, simple because he was so easily accessible, complicated because he was a complex man. It is hard for me to believe now that after all the years that have passed, he had “only” been teaching for 12 years in 1978. And yet, to me, he seemed to be at that time the consummate professor: his greying hair with a forelock covering his brow, his smart beard revealing a knowing smile, his twinkling eyes as he looked at you, and his ever so wisp of a Belgian accent. All of these characteristics belied the majesty of the man.

I intuitively understood that he seemed so right to be a college professor in an old fashion way. He read books and journals, not on the Internet, but on real paper. He also read the papers—not some online facsimile, but the real thing. He loved Latin phrases and often quoted them. One that I recall him often using is ad astra per aspera, “to the stars with difficulty,” perhaps a phrase reminiscent of his early escape from Nazi Germany and arrival to the New World. He loved Towson University, but with a tough love. The foibles and foolishness of administrators made him laugh as much as it made him angry. You could see, almost feel, the anger coming when he learned of some new silly administrative policy that the Board of Regents or the campus administration had foisted on the faculty. He knew full well that he could do nothing to stop it. Yet, at the same time, that didn’t stop him from pouring out the best invective possible, if only for the moment. It all ended almost as quickly as it began. And we knew it ended when he started to laugh in that wonderful, contagious way.

We forget that his training at Johns Hopkins University, from which he received his Ph.D. in 1969, focused on international relations, in particular international law. He was a student of Robert W. Tucker, an expert in the field, and I suspect Eric expected to teach in that field. In fact, he may well have, though I doubt it, given that when he arrived at Towson in the fall of 1966, Pratam (“Pete”) T. Merani had been on the faculty for a year. He would soon become Pete’s closest colleague and friend. A scholar of Pakistani-Indian territorial disputes in areas like Goa, Pete also taught international law, which meant that Eric would not be teaching it, although like Pete, he focused his earliest research and writing on international law, especially
the law of neutrality and private law in the global system. In any event, Eric focused on other areas of Political Science, because he loved to teach—and never without the crutch of overheads or, God forbid, the progeny of overheads, the PowerPoint, where instructors project a paragraph on a screen and then proceed to read it aloud as if students were illiterate.

I think Eric’s greatest love was to teach upper-division courses in political theory. After all, it was his transformation of POSC 101, Introduction to Political Science, into an introduction to political thought as a course for freshmen and sophomores. All current faculty members who teach that course today have followed Eric’s lead, but this was not the same in the 1970s. At that time, students were forced to study tedious textbooks with the same official name of the course.

In any event, it was the upper-level courses he loved most, though, for the longest time, I disagreed with the manner in which he taught it. He admired George H. Sabine’s classic work, *A History of Political Theory*. First published in 1937(!), it was the first of its kind to be a comprehensive review of all the ideas of the great political philosophers from the ancients to the rise of Fascism and Nazism. Of course, Eric did not use the first edition, but rather the slightly revised editions that followed (there were four in all, ending in 1973). Sabine, who served as a professor and vice president of Cornell University, died 11 years earlier, so afterward, the updates were undertaken by Thomas Thorson of Indiana University.

I thought that because inexpensive paperbacks on individual authors were available, it made more sense for students to collect a small pile of books to read the works in their original or translated forms. Eric was persuaded, however, that this was wrong, because Sabine had been a giant in the field and conveyed the ideas of political philosophers in plain language. Moreover, Sabine’s approach to political thought matched Eric’s. Sabine wrote that “theories of politics are themselves part of politics” in that they convey a sense of the social and political moment at the time they were written. In other words, political theories are not merely ideas in a vacuum, but they informed us about more than what the writer was thinking: they opened the entire world in which political philosophers lived in ways that studying political institutions or political actors could not. For Eric, this was most satisfying insofar as it allowed his students to gain a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the social and political environment in which ideas flourished, were debated, and even condemned. As it turned out, his students enjoyed the text, and, not unexpectedly, became proficient in the study of the grand history of political thought.

If Eric loved teaching the history and development of political thought, he was clearly an internationalist in his outlook. Perhaps this is related to his European origins, having been born in Belgium and having lived in the South of France during World War II (he became a U.S. citizen in 1953). Thus, more akin to his internationalist outlook, Eric also loved to teach Soviet-American Relations, a course that soon had to be transmogrified into Russian-American Relations after the demise of communism. There, he used another classic text: George F. Kennan’s 1961 magisterial *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin*. Eric viewed this work as an invaluable contribution to our understanding of how the emergent Soviet empire and the United States quickly developed an adversarial relationship to complicate an already complex world, leading to the Cold War of the post-World War II era. Like the Sabine book, I thought for a time that this one was dated, but once again I soon saw the wisdom in Eric’s choice when I realized that Kennan’s insightfulness, complemented by Eric’s judgment, gave his undergraduates the proper perspective of the ongoing and developing relationship between the United States and the U.S.S.R., today Russia. Eric greatly admired Kennan, who started his career in the U.S. diplomatic service and rose to become, for a very short time, the United States
ambassador to the Soviet Union. It always seemed to me that the Soviet’s 1952 expulsion of Kennan only increased Eric’s admiration and respect for the man, who, like Eric, had no truck for Soviet totalitarianism (or any form of tyranny, for that matter).

Eric’s guidance in these matters of instruction helped me become a better classroom instructor. Like many faculty members of the late 1970s, early 80s, I taught, as did many instructors, several courses within the three areas of my doctoral work: in my case, political thought, public law, and international relations, including American foreign policy. In 1985, however, when our prelaw advisor, Gerd Ehrlich retired, I soon took on that task, and Eric, who was then chairing the department, mentioned to me that I would soon have to develop the courses that Gerd had taught in constitutional law. When I put this off mainly out of procrastination, Eric again approached me privately in the narrow corridors of Linthicum Hall to tell me to get on with it. Eric’s voice was stern and decisive, but when I looked at him, he had that classic twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face. I knew then that while this was an “order,” he left it to me to get on with the task he had earlier given me. Today, not only do I teach that one course, but to Eric’s delight, I developed it into three.

Eric’s contributions to teaching and learning extended beyond the academy. From the 1970s through the 1990s, whenever a major incident occurred in the world, especially when it involved U.S. interests in terms of foreign policy or national security, Eric was called upon by the local television stations to comment. This was especially true when the subject involved the Soviet Union (later Russia) or the Middle East. One example arises when the “Intifadas” (or uprisings) exploded in the Israeli occupied territories (Eric only referred to them as the territories, dropping the word “occupied”), requiring the Israeli Defense to engage in daily struggles with rock-throwing Palestinian youths. Eric’s views, like his assessment of most things, were strongly felt and clearly expressed, not in emotional or passionate terms, but in reasoned thinking. I suspect, however, that underlying the clarity of his ideas and expression lay a seething urge to lash out against the uprising.

But not on the air. There, he was the seemingly mild-mannered, professorial analyst, who had the uncanny ability to separate his feelings from his thinking. In 1994, he appeared on C-SPAN to explain the burgeoning new nationalistic forces that were pouring out of Eastern Europe in the wake of the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union. He wound up debating a fellow named George Kenney from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (today he blogs on “electric politics”) over identifying the causes of ethnic and nationalistic violence. In his typical way, Eric was coolheaded and reasoned as he debunked the supercilious and superficial reasoning that Kenney furnished.

While television interviews were time consuming, Eric along with Pete Merani, who died in 1996, also conducted a weekly Sunday morning call-in radio program on domestic and world affairs. I don’t know how long the show ran, but it was a serious effort designed to extend his teaching prowess to the larger community. He and Pete invited experts to answer questions and respond to comments from themselves as well as listeners on a variety of important topics. They even included some folks from Towson like Martha Kumar, Joseph Rudolph, and, yes, me from Political Science as well as Robert Caret, the then-Provost of the University and now Chancellor of the University System of Maryland.

And then there was the music. One of the things that moved Eric more than anything, in my judgment, was music, especially the sweet mellifluous sounds of eighteenth-century French baroque composers. While I thought I knew a lot about the eighteenth century, he introduced me
to the wonderful world of Marin Marais, a master of the viol whose work is marvelously accessible today. I first heard his compositions when I wandered into Eric’s office probably 25 years or so ago, and instead of focusing on the issue I initially wanted to raise, we talked about Marais and his mesmerizing sounds.

If teaching was one of Eric’s major achievements, perhaps the most significant step he took early on was to mold the department according to his vision. He created a model of collegiality, even among a group of highly well-trained, independently minded faculty members, all expert in a wide-ranging array of sub-disciplines. The University has long demanded departmental meetings as the best means to accomplish the work of the departments. Indeed, Eric followed that directive, but only to a minor degree: the tenured and non-tenured faculty met annually in the fall to discuss promotions, tenure, rank, and merit. Eric clearly hated meetings, because he thought they were worthless and mind-numbing and because he saw what happened to academic departments when the issues pulled people apart, caused irredeemable rifts, blew up into rancorous arguments, and created lifelong enemies.

Instead, Eric conducted departmental business in an alternative way. We discussed policies, planning, and staffing just as thoroughly devoid of the conventional bitterness and venom, in the hallways, just has he had accosted me to chat about constitutional law classes. Or even better, we met at a bar to discuss these matters over drinks, first in the Auburn House, and then later at the Burkshire (now the University Club on campus). Even when we “met” for our twice-per-year dinner meetings at the Johns Hopkins Club (among us, Eric was the sole member of the club), we may have chatted briefly about issues, but that wasn’t the point. The idea was to enjoy one another’s company. Eric could amass a true consensus, a word that he loved to use, so that we could come together without actually, well, coming together in more corporate ways.

For those of us who have served Towson for a while, we have Eric to thank for this: his caring and supportive qualities that brought us to become the distinct and distinctive small unit in the larger entity of the University community. So we bid our Eric, this wonderful man, in the words of Virgil, *sic itur ad astra*, “thus a journey to the stars,” in memory of his life’s work, his steadfast dedication, and his enduring commitment. He was a man who truly lived with a soul on fire.