Remembering Eric
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Abstract: A short essay commemorating the life of Dr. Belgrad.

The Eric Belgrad who I was fortunate enough to know for nearly half of both of our lives had an enviable range of interests and talents to match. He was an old world scholar, meaning he could eschew those pesky translations of Greek and Latin in teaching his political philosophy classes. He was as accomplished a photographer as anyone can be without crossing over from amateur to professional status. He never drove his large vehicles or built a winter’s fire without listening to the classical music whose composers’ lives he knew as well as Machiavelli’s and Plato’s. Above all, he was as good a conversationalist, not to mention friend as anyone could hope to have.

Classical teaching, classical music, classical tastes, and a penchant for black and white photography aside, no one lived more in, or enjoyed the present than Eric. A genuine Holocaust survivor, Eric could still some 70 years later recall almost fondly the young German soldier who held up the train on which he and his mother were fleeing their native Flanders at the French border, not to off-load them into a boxcar bound for an ugly, SS end, but to buy young Eric a candy bar before sending them on their way in their quest to reach neutral Switzerland. It was one of the very few times in which I ever heard him speak of his Jewish past. Rather, his best story concerning his religion centered on the day near Christmas of long ago when the Jewish rabbi who was to marry him arrived unexpectedly, and the resultant near panic with which he and his future bride rushed to stuff their decorated Christmas tree into the closet before opening the apartment door.

But this brings me to the heart of my small footnote to Eric’s large life. As nearly as I can tell, mixed in with but never obscured by his wide ranging interests or greater network of friends that most of us collect in a lifetime aside, were Eric’s two great passions: one for his beloved wife Gloria of so many years, and the other for the Department he built and stamped, we hope irrevocably, with his profound commitment to quality and collegiality.

Of the former, he unabashedly spoke frequently, including a confession that he once decked his longtime friend, colleague, and co-founder of this Journal, Peter Merani for once daring to try to woo Gloria-of-the-tight-sweaters. As for the latter, he never needed to speak of it, though he did often. It was evident every time he came on campus, and his Department adored him for it and sought over the 30 years that I was a part of its faculty to follow his lead as our Department more than doubled in size during his chairmanship. His picture hangs in our Departmental corridor, an unnecessary daily reminder that the Department was his legacy to all of us.

During those years that the Department grew, so did our friendship as I perhaps unceremoniously tried to fill the gap that Pete’s resignation left in Eric’s schedule. During a sabbatical leave, it was to Eric that my wife and I wrote our weekly insights into early 1990s life in post-communist Czechoslovakia (he particularly savored the tales of the home-made videos submitted to the local television station for its weekend “Strip at Midnight” showings). It was with Eric that we dined at the Ambassador’s weekend, make-your-own-bloody-Mary brunch as often as we could for more than 20 years. It was in Eric’s house that my wife and I were so
graciously received and comforted the night we returned home to find our own house, belongings, and beloved pets lost in a fire. And it was at the Ambassador that I frequently met Eric for lunch during those dreadful days when Gloria was nearing her end in a nearby hospital. We never spoke of those weekday lunches after her death, but shifted our venue to the Macaroni Grill in Timonium, where we became regulars for lunch, and sometimes for long afternoon chats when the restaurant’s midday deal on large bottles of the house wine were too good to miss. I miss his friendship and the ability this May to celebrate his 82 birthday. He was a remarkable man in so many ways. He inspired collegiality, and if you ever wondered what a good man would look like these days, you only had to spend a moment with Eric. I still find myself occasionally looking for his baby-sized SUV as I walk from the faculty lot to our building, and feel the loss anew.

Eric died in September of 2015.
We have not been to the Ambassador or Macaroni Grill since.