

AND THEN THERE WERE FEWER

Cancelled Historian's Column

We just heard of Toby Berger's passing. Pain, sorrow, and feeling of loss! For Toby was one of the Giants of the "old guard" of Information Theory. But also because Toby was a delightful human being. A man of integrity, compassion, and fairness.

I met Toby in the early seventies. This is half a century ago. I had invited him to lecture in a series I had organized at the University of Maryland in 1973 about recent developments and future trends in communications. His lectures were based on his early book on Rate Distortion Theory. It was an illuminating presentation delivered with zest, enthusiasm, and a compelling sense of engagement.

After that, I had the privilege to interact with him more or less continually for many decades. A stranger to the tennis courts, I discovered that a great mind can excel also in areas of physical activity. Shannon was unicycling. Toby was a formidable racket player. And then, there was the harmonica. Life without music is life half-lived. The fascinating and complex sound of that instrument was always for me the antithesis of its simplicity. Not a Stradivarius! Not a Grand Piano! Yet, in the hands (and mouth) of an inspired and skillful player it could work wonders. Toby was a master of harmonica.

Like most "greats" in the Information Theory Group, Toby had also a fine sense of humor. His jokes were the counterpoint to his solemn introspection when we had visited the Holocaust museum in Israel during the 1973 Symposium in Ashkelon. His was a bright face that turned brighter and sunny when he smiled with kindness.

After a career at Cornell he moved to UVA for several years before retiring. His professional distinctions were many, including of course the Shannon Award. Few are those who mentored students who became themselves Shannon awardees. Toby was one of them.

I saw him last during the fateful ISIT at Vail, Colorado, in 2018. That was the ISIT that started (if not caused) a Phase Transition in the History of the IT Society. He was in disbelief as he was learning about the dark shadows that were cast during that Symposium which, in the past, used to be a gathering of joy and learning.

One by one those who "made" the field are leaving us. We all become poorer. And so does our collective intellect and conscience.

Farewell, Toby!

A. Ephremides