Obituary for George A. Bubenik

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On 23 January, 2018, Dr. George A. Bubenik (75), a member of the Editorial Board, *European Journal of Wildlife Research*, passed away.

George was born on May 19, 1942, in Brno, Czechoslovakia. Now, almost 30 years since the collapse of the communist era in George's native country, less and less people can realise what it meant to grow up and work under the dictatorship of communists. George's father, an internationally known deer biology scientist, was fired from his position in 1958 being labelled as "politically unreliable". At that time to be marked "politically unreliable" was a stigma for all the family members. George wished to study natural science; however, he did not receive permission for that. The only possibility for him to study "some sort of biology" was dentistry at the Faculty of Medicine, Charles University. There he graduated with an M.D. in 1967. (Honestly, he was lucky to not be prevented from gaining any undergraduate education which happened frequently to young

people originating from a family like George.) No wonder, when Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviet Union and its satellites in 1968, George did not hesitate and defected first to Switzerland and later to Canada where he joined his parents who had got out of their native country earlier. In Canada, he met his future wife Ella, with whom he has had three children and seven grandchildren.

Over the period of their 45 years of marriage, Ella became the pillar of his life and she was his support until the last moments of his life. She created an invaluable family background which allowed George to be fully involved in his research. Ella not only raised their children and cared for the family, but as a qualified nurse, she also helped him occasionally with his field work. Later, when their children grew up, Ella travelled with George across the world being a true companion in life. When he got ill, he had to take an early retirement and eventually had to give up his research and many of his hobbies and ultimately his home. What he never lost was the love and devotion of Ella. Although this had been an incredibly difficult road for her, she did her best to handle it with grace.

George was Czech, and Ella was Swiss. They spoke with their children in their languages, i.e. in Czech and German. Children picked up enough from friends and neighbours and the television to have learned English fairly well before starting school. George and Ella used German as the language for communication between the two of them. It always fascinated me how masterfully and easily was George switching between English, German, and Czech during conversation, translating the meaning from "the other language" depending on who was just present. From 1976 to 2004, George was a professor in the Department of Integrative Biology at the University of Guelph. He was interested first of all in physiology. He also gave interviews explaining sneezing, hick-ups, yawning, eye blinking, and goose bumps, as well as on the "biochemistry of love".

Being influenced by the scientific focus of his father, the late Dr. Anthony (Tony) Bubenik, George had been interested primarily in deer physiology. Tony was very proud that his son continued his antler work and expanded his ideas on antler growth. They were both brilliant, hardworking, and gracious.

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Nevertheless, George was an internationally known researcher not only in the study of deer, but also in melatonin. According to WOS Citation Reports, he published 126 papers in peer-reviewed journals and they have been cited 3773 times. (The average citations per item were 29.94 times, and the average citations per year were over 82 times.) He reached the h-index equal to 35!

He has been known in the deer world for numerous discoveries in deer physiology as well as for his editorial work on books. His proudest work was a book on Horns, Pronghorns, and Antlers that he edited together with his father (Bubenik and Bubenik 1990).

However, the most prominent response from the scientific world was received from his pioneering work on melatonin. For example, his paper on gastrointestinal melatonin (Bubenik 2002) was cited 363 times.

George was manually skilled. He designed and built an experimental deer facility. He stretched the fences himself, sometimes with the help of the students hired as summer jobs. When the facility was finally finished, a huge tree (with a diameter of more than 1 m) from the forest beside the fence fell lengthwise over almost all the individual stalls. George did not give up and rebuild it. He did all his research work there. He worked tirelessly. His experiments often went over night for 24 h. He fed his deer, and at the same time, he was cleaning, shovelling snow, etc. He even installed toys for his deer.

The most trouble he had was with the animal care committee. For example, they forced him to build a big roof in the forest, for the deer to go when it rains. However, after he built it, nobody ever saw a deer under the roof during rain. This was the first but not the last problem. After many years, they decided to close his deer farm. (I personally think there was a bit of envy about how successful in science he was.)

When George lost his own research base, he quickly recovered, utilised his international contacts, and started realising his research ideas abroad in the USA, Germany, Chile, Slovakia, and Uruguay. Paradoxically, the loss of his research base allowed him to extend his field of application and new studies with a number of other deer species. Last but not least, it also brought him back to his mother's country, Czechia. There we carried out many experiments resulting in about two dozen of papers. It was always inspiring. Whenever George arrived, he had a number of ideas and new plans. He had a consistent, responsible, and systematic way of preparing any experiment.

George was a brilliant debater, sometimes with sharp criticisms. At the same time, however, he was ready to help others and/or share his knowledge. Whether it was for a collar for remote blood sampling he developed together with his father, a blow-gun he invented for immobilising the deer, or plans for his "deer farm", he sent a plan or schema to anyone interested. He easily gave advice to younger colleagues and discussed their findings and ideas with them with his typical enthusiasm, thus inspiring them and helping them to start and pursue their careers.

George inspired not only scientists, but also a few generations of his students. He often had the best evaluations from them, because he told them practical examples. For example, George made a handstand in front of his class and walked a bit on his hands (at 60) to explain something in relation with melatonin! No wonder they applauded him....

As important as his work was, everybody always knew that family came first. Whether it was by caring for his elderly parents or taking the time to be at his children's soccer games or school plays, he always demonstrated his commitment to his family.

George enjoyed sports, particularly downhill and cross-country skiing, scuba diving, and volleyball with the Czech Club; all plants and animals, particularly bromeliads and the family dog; travelling, mainly camping with his family and beach vacations with Ella; playing music on his organ or harmonica; and dancing with Ella at the Swiss Club. After retiring, George volunteered at a Guelph theatre.

Although he was a proud Czech, he was equally proud to be a Canadian. It was apparent every time a world hockey championship was on. If you know hockey, you know that there are now and have been in the past some very good Czech hockey players in NHL. Very often, the Czech national team would play against Canada, often with a medal on the line, and George always cheered for team Canada!

George was an excellent and experienced speaker. When he was invited to give a plenary opening at the 6th International Deer Biology Congress in Prague in 2006, at certain times, his voice broke and he had to take time off to regain his composure. I think he was touched emotionally, having this plenary at home....

George was a massive figure in deer science. He made a great contribution and this will not be forgotten. He has contributed much to deer science, but more importantly has enriched the lives of many.

George and I spent some great times together. I had been one of the last ones outside of his family, who communicated (actually was trying to communicate...) with him by Skype and later by phone (always with somebody on the other side who had to help him with the PC and/or phone...) in the hope communication in his native language would help him. After a prolonged period of illness, let us wish him peace after what was, from my point of view, an unjust final period of his life. I will be missing him a lot. A lot....

References

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