

Obituary



Professor Trygg Engen pictured (left) with Professor Gesualdo Zucco in 1987.

Professor Trygg Engen (1926–2009)

I am deeply sad in announcing that during the night in between Wednesday 25 and Thursday 26 November, 2009, Professor Trygg Engen died.

This is a grievous loss for our community because Trygg was one the most eminent and leading authorities in the field of the chemosensory sciences and has received along with his academic life much international recognition and awards.

He was born in 1926 in Oslo and after the Second World War he left Norway and followed his family to the United States. There, he received his Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Nebraska in 1954 and was appointed Professor (1965) and Emeritus (1991) at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

Trygg was author of numerous papers on the human sense of smell (from psychophysics, learning and memory to the cognitive, applied, clinical, and neuropsychological aspects of olfaction) and of remarkable books as “The Perception of odors” and “Odors sensation and memory.”

But, beyond these cold academic notes he was for me and for some other colleagues of my generation, such as Rachel Herz, Mats Ollson, Benoist Schaal, and Steven Nordin, a mentor, an intellectual guide and a close friend.

Flashbacks come to my mind: my first letter to him (when I was a PhD student), sent after days spent at the library, looking for people involved on this neglected field called olfaction; his availability, helpfulness, and generosity in

the first answer and in the following interactions with me; the impatience I had in waiting for a letter from him (when, luckily, neither internet nor e-mails nor “the special effects” of PowerPoint still existed!).

Later the invitation to Providence (1987); the warm hospitality at his own home; my first learning experiences with the odorants in his lab; our nice, productive, and endless scientific discussions on the perception of odors and odor memory.

I also think about the stories of his life and family in Norway: the Second World War, the imprisonment of his father (member of the resistance to Nazi); his lively childhood, his love for nature, skiing, soccer, and sailing; his deep and emotional remembrances of the fragrances of the Norwegian woods, the odors of his home, and even of the cattle odors of his grandfather’s farm.

In 1988, Trygg came to Italy with his wife Elizabeth. I invited him for a series of lectures on the human sense of smell. This was also a beautiful time spent with him. I remember that I took him to Venice airport with a very old ramshackle orange-color Ford car. He was not disturbed at all rather he gave me suggestions about how to fix it. How different he was compared with the serious and formal Italian professors to whom I was accustomed! Trygg told me how much he enjoyed his visit to Padua, the environment and the Italian food. He wrote to me after saying: “our times together were special both here in the states and in Padua. (...).”

Following his visit, we started to write letters to each other; the rate was slow because Trygg didn't much like new technologies, such as e-mail. One letter I especially recall was when, already retired, he wrote to me that a paper I had dedicated to him "literally brought tears to my eyes (...)."

Although Trygg complained of the physical frustration of ageing, I was very surprised when I heard from my friend Rachel Herz that Trygg had undergone spinal surgeries for nerve damage to his leg. Yet, although his physical con-

ditions were bad, she wrote to me that she found him as lively and sharp as ever.

It is a tremendous loss that the heart failure he suffered the night of 25 of November was sudden and definitive.

I think that I share my feelings with Rachel, Mats, Benoist, and Steven in saying that we will keep the memory of our Magister and friend in our heart forever.

Rest in peace dear Trygg.

Gesualdo (Aldo) Zucco