

Lighting a Candle for a Friend

By Matt Wheeler, Digital Collections Curator

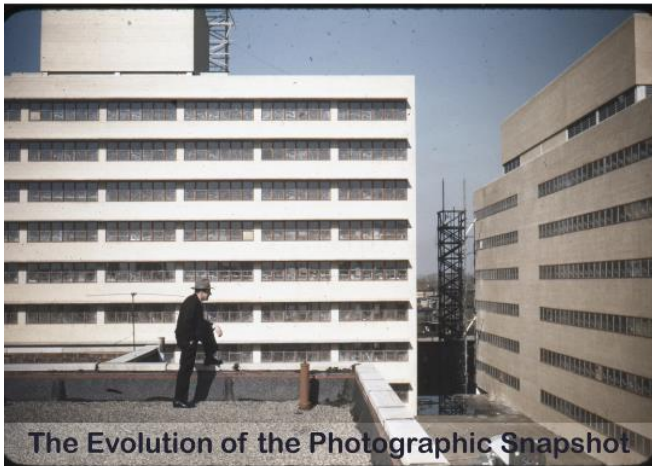
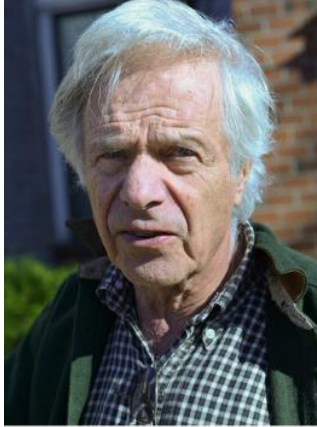


Photo by John Dolan, used with his kind permission.

With sad hearts and fond recollections, we say goodbye to a friend of many years, Michael Simon, who died in December, around seven months shy of his 90th birthday.

We met Michael sometime in late 2013 or early 2014 after he heard my colleague, Kevin Johnson, give an illustrated talk at the Belfast Library. Kevin is a true ambassador for the museum's photo collections; Michael was a true ambassador for photography itself. Their introduction was a foregone conclusion, and soon after that, Michael started volunteering here, using one of our flatbed scanners to digitize glass plates and film negatives. This task never failed to engross him; uncovering old photos stoked the furnace of his curiosity. We consider conversations with our volunteers to be part of the job, and one we prize highly. Looking at photos during his hours here, Michael nimbly made connections between the medium of photography and history, politics, religion, and culture. His fascination was infectious, and he regularly drew us into meaty discussions on these topics, as if he was

inviting us to cook and eat a five-course dinner with him. These exchanges always left us feeling more alive.

The cheerful optimism, which was one of his most essential attributes, belied the hardships of his early life. His family were secular Jews who endured the reactionary antisemitism of mid-20th century Hungary. His father was conscripted into the army after Hungary aligned itself with the Axis powers during WWII; Michael last saw him as a child in 1942. He and his mother barely survived the harrowing nightmare of Nazi occupation, only to live through the privation and dread of Stalin-era communism when the country became part of the Soviet Union.

These experiences shaped his character and his worldview. He became a skeptic and also learned to appreciate the small joys in life. He learned to bear up under the weight of unhappiness. He emerged a compassionate and intellectually hungry young man with a buoyant sense of humor. During the Soviet years, he attended a small Jewish high school. He found refuge in the friendships he formed there, in his studies, and particularly in his blossoming love of literature. While he was not drawn to competitive sports, he took to rowing on the Danube, served as coxswain aboard larger boats, and was enthusiastic about instructing younger rowers. His exposure to photography (he would have appreciated the pun) began early, and it took root in his mind. This grew into another passion he explored as a student.

He continued his academic life in technical college and briefly considered staying in Hungary during the uprising against Soviet occupation in 1956, when he joined the short-lived Hungarian National Guard. When that rebellion was crushed, along with the hope of an independent Hungary, he and his mother escaped the country and immigrated to the U.S.

Michael didn't talk much about these events with us, and never in detail. Regarding his history, we were much more familiar with his years in academia, teaching the art and science of photography to young people at Beloit College in Wisconsin, one of the most gratifying experiences of his life. He held that position for nearly 30 years; during that time, he met his wife, Carol. They spent many happy years raising their son Nicholas and their daughter Amy in Beloit.

We didn't cross paths with him until some time after they retired to Swanville, Maine. By then, Michael was a grandfather, had more or less stopped working in his darkroom due to the hand tremors that plagued him, and spent Tuesday afternoons talking politics with friends of mixed political persuasions at Darby's, a longtime local restaurant. Soon after we became acquainted, we collaborated with him on a special photography exhibit which was part of our larger 2015 seasonal exhibit, *The Magic of Photography*. Michael curated *The Evolution of the*

Photographic Snapshot, drawing on his own collected images to explore this universal means of communication and expression. From the intro panel, in his own words:

“Snapshots teach us that the camera is magic, that it often sees more than the photographer does. The resulting picture then reaches beyond the particular event and tells us about our lives as human beings.”

We appreciated Michael’s wry attitude toward aging, a reality that was clearly on his mind. I’ll never forget the flippant response he always gave when I asked how he was doing, delivered in a beguiling Eastern European accent: “Oh, not bad for an old fart.”

Even as his health declined, he continued to show up here; it was clear he enjoyed it as much as we enjoyed having him. When his tremor made it too difficult to handle photos during digitization, we stopped seeing him every week, but we stayed in touch. A procedure to steady his hands produced some temporary relief; he remarked to me over the phone, “I’m so happy I can eat soup without getting it on the ceiling.”

It’s been too long since Kevin and I last visited with him. On a snowy day two years ago, I picked him up from the condo in downtown Belfast where he and Carol had settled in after they sold their Swanville house. Back at Kevin’s, we all transformed the groceries he’d instructed us to buy into a delicious Hungarian mushroom soup, not skimping on the paprika and sour cream.

Michael, with your lively mind and wit, and your unfailing friendliness, you won us over and gave us more than you’ll ever know. Many thanks for your years of service to the Photo Archives and to Penobscot Marine Museum. We’ll always miss you.