

Mischa in Montevideo

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I have been asked to say a few words on this occasion for which we celebrate the 75th birthday of our dear and admired Mischa Cotlar, to recall shared experiences and events, and the feelings evoked by our old friendship.

I will start by his name. Mischa Cotlar is, really, just and simply Mischa. Mischa is Mischa for his friends and old acquaintances, but also for many others. Mischa may be translated into Spanish as “Miguelito,” but, as often happens, in the translation important nuances are lost. Mischa is a very common and typical variation of a Russian name, which besides being a diminutive implies a strong load of affection. And, in the case of our Mischa, this last component has a lot of importance and it is deeply ingrained in the personality of its holder.

The history—my history—of my friendship with Mischa begins some 50 years ago and is closely tied to that of another great friend, Rafael Laguardia. Laguardia was the elder of our group of young Montevideans of the 1930s, avidly interested in mathematics. He was the oldest not only in age but also in background, since he had completed a degree in science at the Sorbonne, studying under some of the most distinguished professors of France.

Since my adolescence, I was strongly attracted by mathematics and has started to study—completely alone—subjects that were far beyond the high school requirements. I did that in the most crazy, absurd, extravagant way, but this is not the occasion to enter into details. In fact, I learned many things, which constituted an indescribably chaotic mass of knowledge.

In 1935 I realized that this was leading nowhere, and one day I visited Laguardia, without any sort of recommendation, in his very modest home, which was some three

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blocks from my own. I did not know Laguardia, but I knew who he was because a schoolmate had pointed him out to me in the quadrangle of the old Instituto Vázquez Acevedo (Montevideo's leading college preparatory school.). This visit started a very close friendship that lasted until his much lamented death a few years ago. I was in jail at the time and could not be with him then. A short time before dying, Laguardia presented me with an *Enciclopedia Larousse* which somehow passed through the jail censors, and which was, and still is, a source of remembrance of him. It was, for me and for many other prisoners, an open window to the world which all of us appreciated greatly. Laguardia introduced me to the small group of mathematical *aficionados*: Antonio Petracca, Fernando Fortezza, Carlos A. Infantozzi, Luis Castagnetto, and ... Mischa. Laguardia had met—as I also did, later on—a very cultured Russian immigrant who had reached Uruguay in the second decade of this century. His life was very modest, and he had a small stand, where he sold newspapers and magazines, in front of a hotel, on the Avenida 18 de Julio (Montevideo's main avenue). This gentleman had a teenage son who showed a great mathematical vocation, and he asked Laguardia to help the youngster in his studies. The son was Miguelito, Mischa, who joined our small group of enthusiasts. In this way our long-lasting friendship began, which has continued uninterrupted until now, in spite of all the accidents of life and the geographical constraints.

I want to say a few more words to describe the ambience in the small mathematical circle at Montevideo at the time of our encounter. For a rather long while, every weekend "Don" Julio Rey Pastor came to visit us from Buenos Aires and taught us on some of the new developments of mathematics—of which we knew nothing. Our mathematical relation with Rey Pastor was very fruitful, since we were able to discuss our mathematical problems freely in a one-to-one basis. In this way, our horizons were open to the then new mathematics: general topology, algebra, modern analysis. Don Julio had a very complex personality, and occasionally he was very difficult to deal with; but the overall balance of our relationship with him is, undoubtedly, enormously positive for the development of mathematics in Uruguay.

On the other hand, our small group established a close and relatively assiduous contact with the much larger and more mature group of the Argentine mathematicians. We participated in the main scientific meetings of the Unión Matemática Argentina, and published most of our first papers in its journal, the *Revista de la UMA*. I want to mention here González Domínguez, Babini, Zarantonello, among so many others, later joined by several expatriate mathematicians: Santaló, Pi Calleja, and Balanzat from Spain, Beppo Levi and Terracini from Italy, and Monteiro from Portugal. These distinguished mathematicians, in different moments and circumstances, had to emigrate from their own countries due to complex and bitter situations as well as to persecutions, and settled in Argentina and Uruguay. For us Uruguayans our scientific molding was, from the very beginning, really exceptional. We are much indebted to this truly internationalist environment, both rioplatense and European.

As I said before, Mischa was in the Uruguayan group. It was immediately evident that he not only was very talented but showed a great originality. I remember the impression made on me by his manuscript "Estructuras de Anágenos," which, under the title "Aritmética Abstracta," was published in the *Boletín de la Facultad de Ingeniería* of Montevideo in 1937. Later on, after many years of working in Argentina, came his doctorate from the University of Chicago and the many more years of fruit-

ful investigations of the highest quality that he is still pursuing, in spite of the exiles and other obstacles. And, paradoxically, these exiles allowed him to renew his bonds with Uruguayan mathematicians and, in particular, with our colleague Rodrigo Arocena.

On many issues outside mathematics, Mischa and I have positions that are very different, ranging from dietary habits to philosophical viewpoints. But these divergences never encumbered our friendship: on the contrary, I would dare to say that this diversity has been a very rich ingredient in a human bond that is very intense and personal.

Yet Mischa has a fault, a very pronounced fault. He has always been, and always will be, too modest. What is worse, his is a modesty that is tremendously authentic and true. I can imagine his state of mind at this moment, in this session that was intended to be, and really is—in spite of Mischa's opinions—more than a well-deserved homage to his talent as a mathematician, an homage—why not say it?—to Mischa the man, the loving and lovable friend.

But Mischa should not be upset, because even if he dislikes the word homage, he knows that this is not a ceremonious, stiff, formal homage. It is an homage in which, irrespective of the high intellectual respect, predominates the deep, human affection felt for Mischa by all of us who have the pleasure of knowing him. And this sort of homage I think he will accept with pleasure, without having modesty making him uneasy.

I want to finish by expressing my friendship and appreciation to Yanny, his *compañera* for so many years. I think that she also deserves to be included in this friendly homage.

It is sad that Laguardia is not here with us today. I knew him very well, and I am sure that if he were alive he would have been as happy as I am now. As happy as we all are, young and old, in this reunion with Mischa, our dear friend.