

GRISHA MINTS

(1939-2014)

Sol Feferman

I want to tell you about when I last saw Grisha—and when I first met him—and something about the many years in between that we shared as comrades and coworkers.

I last saw Grisha in mid-April last spring at our weekly joint seminar meeting before he went off to a conference in St. Petersburg of which he was one of the principal organizers. On the Tuesday after his return, when he had planned to attend the seminar presentation of Boris Zilber, I got an email from him saying:

“In St. Petersburg I got a cold, which developed into pneumonia after I arrived Saturday. Yesterday I checked into the Stanford Hospital, nurses and doctors worked the whole night, now I feel much stronger, but have to stay here at least one more day. In the meantime ... my greatgranddaughter Victoria was born....”

In that email he was also concerned about plans for our seminar for the coming academic year. I answered right away but it was the last I was to hear from him. Instead of his leaving the hospital in a day or two, the terrible news soon came from Marianna that he had suffered a stroke and was in a coma; after that, all my subsequent communications about Grisha’s condition were with her. At one point, I was told that he had awakened briefly, and so that falsely encouraged my hopes that he might come out of it entirely. Grisha died May 29, two days before he was scheduled to give a featured lecture at a year-end workshop here on logic and rationality. It was an honor to take his place on that occasion.

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I first met Grisha 27 years earlier, in August 1987, when I was attending an international conference in Moscow on logic and philosophy of science. I already knew a lot about him, about his exceptional and varied contributions to our field so close to my own, his indispensable and prodigious activity as a reviewer, and his great value in translating

English language logic and mathematics texts into Russian. And of course he knew a lot about me, because of his close attention to everything that was going on in the West. When we finally met, we bonded immediately, not only as logicians well known to each other, but also as secular Jews, and perhaps a bit because of my own Russian connection through my father. At the crowded conference, Grisha spent a lot of time helping me navigate the halls of the enormous Stalinist building of Moscow University, in which he acted as a go-between and translator with his many colleagues eager to establish contact.

That also happened to be a very special time in the USSR. I had been there just once before, in 1966, also in Moscow for another international congress—but what a world of difference there was. At that earlier time, it was the oppressive era of Leonid Brezhnev, while now it was the open era of Mikhail Gorbachev, of Perestroika and Glasnost. It seemed that the Soviet Union was finally emerging from the Communist system and the strains of the Cold War. But what we did not know in 1987 was that it would all collapse in just a few years, and that that would prove to be crucial for Grisha.

There had been a great wave of emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union in the 1970s, mostly to Israel. In 1979, Grisha, too, submitted a request to emigrate, and in order to facilitate that he resigned the research position that he had held from his student days at the Mathematics Institute in Leningrad. Nevertheless, as often happened for one reason or another, his request was not to be granted. In the difficult decade that followed, he supported himself in all sorts of ways, for example by programming and tutoring and doing his translations. Fortunately, he was also able to establish a working connection with the Institute of Cybernetics in Tallinn, Estonia, where the Communist system was looser than in Russia. In Tallinn, he obtained a part time job that later turned into a full time position as Senior Research Associate. And then, finally, in 1991 Grisha was permitted to emigrate. Fortuitously, there was a position open at Stanford for which he was eminently suited: that's how he came to join us here as a Professor of Philosophy followed by courtesy appointments in Mathematics and Computer Science.

I should explain that logic at Stanford has been an interdepartmental program since Pat Suppes initiated it in the 1950s, and it has been taught largely between the Philosophy and Mathematics Departments. Though trained as a mathematician, Grisha became an

integral part of the Philosophy Department, took to his new duties with great energy and diligence and became one of the mainstays of the logic program. Besides his essential contributions through teaching and supervision of both undergraduate and graduate students, he and I worked closely side by side in the logic seminar and on all matters having to do with the status of logic here. Ever concerned with quality, he also studied carefully all the applications for graduate work and the dossiers of candidates for positions, no matter what the field. At the same time, in continuation of his active research up to the last, he helped maintain Stanford as one of the leading centers in the world for proof theory. His passing leaves a hole that will be very hard to fill.

It's been hard to carry on without Grisha. I miss his ideas, his dedication, his readiness to help, his caring, and his unique sense of humor. I have been enlarged by knowing him and working with him over the years, and for that I am truly grateful.