

Remarks re Grisha Mints

at Stanford's Memorial Event at the Faculty Club, 2/6/2015 (by Alexei Stolboushkin)

I first met Grisha in the early eighties, at some Soviet Mathematical Logic conferences. I was a PhD student in Logic. The areas of our research were not particularly related, so a few occasional visits with Grisha were quite general, and we weren't specifically close.

In 1984, I was preparing for my PhD defense at the Steklov Institute in Leningrad, Grisha's Alma Mater. The prep work required frequent visits to Leningrad (I think over a dozen in 1984). One logistical challenge was that I did not have a place to stay. You see, in the Socialist Economy of centralized planning, all hotel rooms in Leningrad had been already allocated according to 11th five-year plan, adopted in 1981, and the powers that be somehow missed my PhD defense in the 4th year of that plan :-)

Grisha accidentally heard about this, and immediately offered me to freely stay with them, in his Leningrad apartment. Like, it was not a big deal. I accepted.

Now it was a new chapter: I then learned that Grisha was out of job and, practically, unemployable, and was being continuously harassed by KGB, who listened to his phone and, presumably, to his apartment as well, reading his mail, and on. Grisha never visibly focused on this, just when we were going to his place the first time, on a quiet street, he quickly whispered to me that I should be cognizant of the fact that anything I say in his place could be recorded.

Again, Grisha was not fixated on this, and all the background I have I have learned from other people, in short:

1. his habilitation dissertation was blocked by Moscow's Steklov Institute (which retained complete control over Leningrad's). It was blocked because he was Jewish.
2. frustrated, he filed paperwork to emigrate, and resigned from Steklov.
3. his emigration request was denied, but he was then put on a blacklist, meaning that no HR department would hire him for any position whatsoever.
4. he was a "refusenik".

As an aside, my understanding has always been that local Mathematicians from Leningrad have completely supported Grisha throughout and even openly defied whatever pressure by allowing Grisha to work at Steklov -- he continued to have a desk there, led seminars, and participated in all discussions. But on paper, he was not there.

So much for the background, now about Grisha. From outside, you would never tell he was in these circumstances. He never came across as grim, miserable, a powerless victim of the iron regime, which crashed him or what not. Always -- full of energy, smiling, poised and super-active. His energy and optimism were contagious. In a typical day, he would work on a new paper, write a number of reviews for *Mathematical Reviews*, *Zentralblatt für Mathematik und ihre Grenzgebiete*, *Computing Reviews*, and/or the *Soviet RZhMat*; write peer reviews for conference papers; and perhaps translate a few pages of a Math book in English, German, or French into Russian (Soviet scientific publishers regularly printed translations of foreign books).

He would spend sometimes hours working to help somebody in a bad situation, such as another refusenik. Then over dinner, he would tell funny stories about Mathematics and mathematicians, plus maybe a couple of political jokes.

Such as:

A job seeker is sitting in the HR department, and the HR man gives him a long look then asks, "OK, so you are *who?*". "Designer", goes the applicant. "Yeah, I already figured out you're not Ivanov, but I mean, by trade".

Here is the point: The Soviet repressive regime was built on fear. They couldn't bully everybody, it would just not scale. But by periodically roughing up this or that guy, they were actually instilling fear into everybody. But fear and laugh can't coexist, the bully who you laugh at implodes.

I do not mean to imply that Grisha was not hurt, he was. I think what was hurting him most was the inability, in those circumstances, to have students. Grisha was an exceptionally gifted teacher and students flocked to him. But, can you really let this bright kid work with you as an advisor and kill any chance of him getting a degree?

Here at Stanford, you know how effective Grisha was in nurturing talent -- through his students, whom he was finally allowed to have -- but also through his work on the Graduate admission committee and the like.

So in one way, this is an optimistic story. You could look at it as a "mid life crisis", from which Grisha came out stronger, and this is true. But in another way, I can't help thinking of all these kids, who were denied a chance to work with Grisha at Steklov, become Mathematicians with capital "M", and, who knows, maybe solve something like, well, *Poincare*. By distracting Grisha's cycles into fighting the idiotic regime, how many problems did Grisha not solve instead? And, as we know, life is finite -- and, actually, short...