Remembering Mischa

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I first learned about Mischa Cotlar when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Buenos Aires, in the late sixties. Even though by then, due to the military coup of 1966, he was not longer in Buenos Aires, Mischa was still very much a presence, a legend, in the Mathematics Department.

I studied Mischa’s book on Functional Analysis and other course notes of his that were published locally. Mischa wrote his books and lectures notes in a friendly style that made it easier for a beginning student to study them on his own.

A few years later, when I was in Canberra doing graduate work, I wrote to him asking for copies of his legendary papers in Matematica Cuyana, 1955. To my surprise he answered. He had seen a research announcement of mine, and he was interested to find out who I was! This started a friendship that would have a profound influence on me.

I think that my decision to take up a job in Venezuela in 1977 had something to do with the fact that Mischa Cotlar and Cora Sadosky were in Venezuela at the time. I wrote to Mischa about my plans and, en route to my new job in Merida, I was invited to spend a couple of days in Caracas with the Cotlars.

I can still remember when, all the way from Sydney, I finally arrived at the Cotlars’ apartment in Caracas. Mischa and Cora were working, and although we had never met before, I was welcomed like a son who had been away and was returning home.

One characteristic of Mischa, that I am sure will be mentioned many times in these testimonials, was that he was infinitely modest and generous. He would always make you feel as if YOU were very accomplished and that he was...well...you! I would return to visit him a few times during my two years in Venezuela. We met again when we were both visiting the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, in 1984. He and Yanny would come often to visit to our home and all of us would have tea together. Soon Mischa and Yanny were telling us many of their stories.

An important turn of events for me was the fact that I eventually managed to convince Mischa for us to set up a two person seminar. We would meet once a week at Mischa’s office in Fuld Hall, and for the most part Mischa would formally lecture on some ideas he had on the connection between Complex Interpolation, Operator Theory and Harmonic Analysis. A special treat just for me!

1I hope to write more extensively about this elsewhere.
Thus, in a very definite or formal sense, I had finally become a student of his.

We met again in 1988. Mischa and Yanny came to visit in Florida and, to our delight, they stayed with us for a week. He came with a special present for me: On this occasion he gave me his copy of Marcinkiewicz’s complete works. This was an old book but I treasured it and I felt as if I had just been given an important prize.

I saw him again in 1995, in Caracas, the occasion was a special conference on in his honor, where I had the privilege to be invited to give a lecture. Some of the sessions were in parallel, so it was a special treat for me that Mischa came to my lecture.

We met for the last time in Buenos Aires, by the end of 2005. At 93 he was undergoing treatment for a serious illness, while at the same time taking care of Yanny, who was also very sick. Still, he managed to come to my lecture at the Instituto Matematico Argentino (IAM). The next day we went to have tea together at the Confiteria Suiza, near his apartment in Buenos Aires. We had a long conversation about his preoccupation with the state of world affairs, his enthusiasm for his new book, written with A. Maestrepieri, a draft of which had been posted in his web site at the IAM! He commented on some new ideas of his about generalized Hilbert transforms, that built on his earlier work. He was very lucid and he had many interesting suggestions of connections about different parts of mathematics.

I was always impressed with Mischa’s search for finding unity in disparate mathematical theories: his imagination and deep knowledge allowed him to connect different subjects in surprising ways. Indeed, his contributions have had decisive influence in several areas of Analysis. I think that beauty was a very important criteria that guided his mathematics, and “beautiful” (“que lindo”) was a word that he would often use when describing mathematics that he liked. I think this was a reflection of his inner-self: He was a beautiful human being.