

## Statement by Alik Wajnberg

I was Israel Gelfand's cardiologist in last 19 years of his life—this was like being a bodyguard to a Mother Teresa or a tobacco connoisseur to a non smoker—his cardiovascular system was sound and his only health problems were those brought by the aging. Facing them with courage, Israel Moiseevich, in his mind over matter way, remained astoundingly youthful, energetic and productive well into his nineties.

He became a frequent guest in our house, a close friend of my wife Ewa and insistent instructor to my four growing children. He spent long hours doing elementary math with each of them punctuated by his bursts of enthusiasm when he felt he had made a contact with a budding mind. In those moments I saw a recurring expression of emotion (umilenye) and agitation in his face, the expression I saw again when we listened to recordings of Schnittke's or Shostakovich's music and memorably when we went to a performance of Saint John's Passion of Bach which affected him greatly. The pleasure of causing a spark in the mind of another being or reaching with it a point of understanding must have been of great value to him and could have been the root of his modus operandi in general and his unusual intellectual sociability. This resulted in creation by this Moscow's Aristotle of his own large Academy, loud and peripatetic and seemingly run by the rule the more the merrier. Solitary pencil biting was not his style; he excelled working with others spreading his command to aim for the simple and the beautiful. With energy to envy and remarkable work ethic (nado rabotat I heard repeatedly) he surely deserved the brilliant court he created and presided over. He was loath to talk about his life unless it meant discussing his work. Nevertheless occasionally personal stories passed his guard. He told us once that his parents first noted their young son's promise when the two year old Israel demanded an explanation as to why the slice of lemon in his father's tea would float rather than sink. He had fond memory of his hard drinking Ukrainian provincial math teacher, who saw something in little Israel others did not. Gelfand, though a good math student was always second in his class, behind a classmate who consistently had better grades. Yet, he related, his teacher with ever present alcohol on his breath would call him winking to the side and whisper; I like your solution better giving Israel a definite encouragement. Gelfand loved music and was proud of his friendship with Schnittke. He said once that he would have loved to be a composer and thought about starting serious musical education when he was in his fifties. Realizing that learning the requisite language would take, as he said 20-30-years, he reluctantly resigned himself into listening rather than aspiring to compose. He insisted I read his Kyoto Prize speech and stressed its main idea of a need of fitting an appropriate language to each field of interest and avoiding a Procrustean imposition of even as successful a language as math onto areas inappropriate to its application like biology or life sciences I mentioned to him that in one of Kafka's writings there is an arresting phrase that could be a motto of his speech- Das Lebendige lässt sich nicht ausrechnen (one cannot calculate out what is alive) He liked the pith and the concision of the quote and said that important ideas have multiple disguises and many coauthors but sharing a thought with Kafka was for him a surprise.

He once saw me reading stories of Chekhov and unexpectedly went into an angry tirade about the nihilism and contempt for life he felt in Chekhov's work. This wholesale condemnation of one of my favorites and its special ferocity puzzled me but I think I

understand it better now.. Israel Moiseevich who lived in the spirit of his heroes Mozart and Euler could have no sympathy for the beauty of disappointment and melancholy frequent in Chekhov. For him this was a subversion of the most important goals of work, clarity and human company. He must have felt that contemplation of human futility, even by a literary giant, is a waste since working joyously to ones last breath and capacity trumped Chekhovs view of life. By Freud.s prescription of happy life to work and to love Israel Moiseevich lived a supremely happy life that elevated the lives of many and .Ewa and I were privileged to count ourselves in that company.

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