

Vera Serganova

Israel Moiseevich was a very unusual person. Being in close contact with him was not altogether a pleasant experience for me, but he is certainly one of few people who changed my life. I will try to formulate what I learned from him in four years of collaboration.

First of all he had a lot of flexibility in doing math. His way of understanding was from calculations, formulas and simple examples to theorems. He was a person who asked questions rather than answered them. In a sense he was an experimental mathematician.

At the time I started to work with him, his memory was already not very good and he often asked me to remind some details of that or this definition. But he had some fantastic intuition and grasp of what is really important. He was not afraid to formulate a bold conjecture, which I just did not have courage to say aloud or even to myself, and then miraculously it happened to be true. This way we came to definition of a Coxeter matroid. I learned from him that there is a such thing as bravery in math.

Talking to him was always very amusing. You would never know what he will say next. In the middle of some tedious calculation he could make some philosophical remark or compare this calculation with some passage from Mozart or Brahms. He had a terrific sense of humor, I learned a lot of jokes from him. He often used jokes as pedagogical device and at some moment he told me "Usual jokes don't work very well on you. I have to try dirty jokes". So I know now a lot of dirty jokes.

In a personal way he was not always polite but he was a great applied psychologist and he forced people to do their best. In his heart he was a kind person. He helped a lot of people in Soviet Union to find a job, to find a good doctor. But certainly the main of his good deeds was the seminar, the famous Gelfand seminar without which the whole Moscow mathematical school was different. He himself understood it as his main responsibility and told me so once.