

Eulogy for Attila Bela von Keviczky (1941-2008)

Richard Hall [12th April 2008]

Professor Dr. Attila Bela von Keviczky, as I would announce his presence, for the entertainment of my children, was a man with multiple facets. Now Hungarian, now German, now New Yorker, now would-be Italian in Canada. Indeed, *Come va?* was his usual greeting to me in the corridor. He would have a way of talking about quite everyday matters in a conspiratorial fashion, glancing over his shoulder to watch out for possible eavesdroppers, or government spies. In Vienna they ask: *Warum einfach wenn man auch komplizierte kann?*, that is to say, why be simple when you can also be complicated? When it came to Attila, the Viennese certainly seemed to have a valid point. He had had a difficult time as a child in Europe and then later as a teenager in Brooklyn, and he thought himself to be dependent for survival, not only on natural intelligence, but also on street-smart skills. This did not always lead him to the smoothest paths to his goals. At times, for example, in his dealings with staff at the university, he might at first appear brusque or argumentative, just for a moment becoming a New York trader, or perhaps an official in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Such a show of toughness was very temporary however, transforming quickly, upon challenge, into an agreeable dependence. Early on in his time at Loyola and Concordia he acquired another survival layer with his fight for tenure. During this period he benefited from massive support by his students: this experience created an enduring pattern of bonding between him and his students. He was not often offered, nor indeed did he seek, to teach advanced undergraduate or graduate courses, with the notable exception of the graduate course on Integral Equations that was scheduled for the current winter term when, unfortunately, he again became extremely sick. This was a shame because I think it would have been a very fine course.

Attila made time for students. He taught them and entertained them, and they liked him very much. He had a precious natural gift, the power to engender affection. Mhenni Benghorbal wrote a masters thesis under his supervision. Mhenni then went away to Ontario for doctoral and postdoc studies, and later returned to Montreal, helped Attila, particularly with computing, and he was then frequently at Attila's side during the final stretch. Elio Manzo had been his graduate student and remained very close to Attila over the years and up to the last days. I recall also that his student Ali Ghassel came to visit from time to time. During Attila's

final trials his life was graced by the constant angelic presence of his friend Jeanine. Attila befriended and taught many of my graduate students, especially Mohammad Tawhid, Nasser Saad, and Qutaibeh Katatbeh, and he became friends with my postdoc Hakan Ciftci. They would go to coffee bars late at night and discuss many important things, always including mathematics.

Attila loved mathematics. He particularly liked analysis and functional analysis. He enjoyed re-reading classic texts, for example, those by Hardy, Smithies, Titchmarsh, Weidmann, Doetsch, and, of course, Riesz-Nagy. He wore out his copy of Riesz-Nagy, which became almost as commented and footnoted as a Torah. He was only partly and reluctantly a soft analyst, that is to say, one who could tolerate the abandon of the physicist. This independence was complementary in our joint work (together with Nasser Saad), for Attila tried not to be influenced by the suggested intuitive explorations and would settle down late at night to fill examination booklets with his own dense spread of penciled equations and remarks. He liked to do this with Nasser at his side, available to explain to, to argue with, and to fetch coffee. It would later become an interesting editorial task to compress all these mathematical contributions into a package of publishable length, and to merge them smoothly together with the original formulation as a problem in mathematical physics. If this late-night activity took place in Prince Edward Island, relaxation would include obligatory viewing of one of the Mummy movies with Nasser. Before he had begun following Nasser to Prince Edward Island, Attila would spend part of his summer at a Military College in Virginia, where, through a friend, he had access to a magnificent library. As Dedekind has observed, and Attila knew, only the mathematician can experience a certain special kind of happiness. Indeed, Attila could at times be so out of it that he became absolutely unreachable, especially, we sometimes felt, when his presence might be desired to help with proof reading. Oscar Wilde recalls that once, when proof reading a poem, he spent a morning inserting a comma, and the afternoon taking it out again. Nasser and I were not always as particular as this, but we would certainly wish for most of the hieroglyphics to arrive at their intended places.

In spite of the considerable influence of his Italian friends, and students, and his love of coffee and Italian food, Attila never acquired the habit that some elegant Italian men have of using a handbag; but he did have his Volvo. "Where is the Mona Lisa? I am double parked" goes the old joke. But it was quite often like this with Attila. He stored all his most precious notes and books in the back seat of the car which, whilst he was at the university, he kept parked on a street near our building. Every two hours during the day he had to run down and make peace with the parking robot. *Pace e bene*, indeed. Attila could be spontaneous and generous. Some years ago, before we had worked together, he was full of bounce one day, very delighted with the acceptance by a German journal of a paper on Hardy spaces. He insisted that I immediately accept an invitation to be taken by car for a magnificent lunch at

an Italian restaurant in Côte St. Luc Road. He could rise to acts of great kindness too. Over a period of many months he attended Heidi's maternal grandparents during their illnesses in Ontario; this meant driving long distances and repeatedly going without normal sleep.

Attila could be a rather entertaining and fine guest. He was engaging, full of jokes and anecdotes, and eager to defend an off-centre position, often laced with mischievous or dark interpretations of human behaviour. As a *Gast Geschenk*, he usually brought along some Tokaj or Southern Comfort but did not care to drink much himself. On occasion he would suggest by body language that one person might perhaps aim to dominate another. The implication was that people from Budapest or Brooklyn understood this sort of thing rather well and were certainly not going to be willing victims: a Hungarian might perhaps follow you into a revolving door, but would always manage to exit first. On some occasions one might say that Attila looked a bit like the actor Bruce Willis. In addition Attila could also exhibit genuine old-fashioned European charm; there is no doubt that he was liked by women. He talked to them and listened to them, and they found in him an understanding companion. Before it closed some years ago, he loved to spend time with friends in the upstairs Tea House in Hudson. Attila also talked to and got along very well with children, and they easily became attached to him.

Perhaps the only district in the world where those advertisements can easily be filmed that show expensive European motor cars gliding along almost empty roads through bucolic landscapes, is to be found in Prince Edward Island. For a moment we might therefore borrow some remembrances from there, of late nights doing mathematics with Nasser, watching the opening of Egyptian tombs, playing with the Saad children in the afternoons, walking for hours along the beaches: this was the good life. So Attila's final wish will soon be fulfilled, that he rest peacefully in this enchanted place, near one of his good friends.