

Albert Dragálin remembered: a tribute

by A.S. Troelstra



Albert Dragálin at a well in the Hortobagy puszta (left) and near the Hortobagy monument (right), 1991

The news of the sudden death of Albert Dragálin, 58 year old, on december 18, 1998, came as a shock to me, and I want to use this occasion to write down my personal recollections of him. These reminiscences therefore concern the man rather than the work. Somebody should write about the work as well, I feel; Albert was a fine mathematician. Let me recall one often forgotten fact: he discovered independently from, and practically simultaneously with Harvey Friedman, the translation usually simply credited to Friedman, and which is so convenient a tool to prove closure under Markov's rule.

In the seventies I became aware of the fact that I had a scientific twin in Russia (a "Doppelgänger" one might say): a man called Dragálin was interested in the same topics (realizability, choice sequences), often asked the same questions concerning them, and sometimes proved the same results.

I sent a batch of offprints --- I might as well have dumped them in the wastebasket, since there came no reaction. I really wanted to know whether they had actually arrived, so I sent a letter asking for acknowledgement. In reply a very formal, bureaucratically worded letter arrived, confirming receipt of the offprints --- nothing more. So either the author was a staunch party member and did not want to get involved with people from the west, or he was in a position where such contacts might cause difficulties for him. As I learnt later, the latter was indeed the case: as an active member of the Orthodox Church, Albert had to watch his step.

When some years later a colleague from our math department, R.W. van der Waall, visited Hungary with a group of mathematicians, Albert's second wife, also a mathematician, acted as their hostess in Debrecen, and van der Waall met Albert, who gave him a special greeting for me, although we had never met so far. The fact that his second wife was Hungarian had given him the opportunity to move to Debrecen, where life was easier than in Moscow. As I learnt later, his first marriage had not worked out and he had separated from his first wife. He had a son from his first marriage whom he was very fond of.

Then, in 1988, there was a meeting "Heyting '88" in Chaika in Bulgaria; there I met for the first time Grigory Mints, Boris Kushner and Albert. Albert turned out to be a sturdy, muscular, impressive man, with a round face, blond hair and striking blue eyes. In repose his face was almost severe, but in conversation a smile from time to time transformed it: his inner nature, gentle and friendly, showed through. Altogether he was a person of considerable charm.

A visit of a week to Amsterdam, paid by the Dutch Mathematical Association, followed not much later. Twice Albert had me frightened during that week, both as a result of taking the right line of streetcar, but going in the wrong direction. The first time he did not turn up at the appointed hour at the Institute. During the weekend he was staying at our home, but wanted to do some shopping on Saturday in Amsterdam. I had instructed him as to bustimes etc., and said we reckoned with him for dinner. But in the evening Albert did not turn up, and we already deliberated whether we should phone the hospitals in Amsterdam, when he arrived at 9.00 P.M. Again the boarding of a streetcar going in the wrong direction was the cause, plus the fact that I had omitted to warn him that the buses were less frequent in the evening. Hence I was rather surprised when at a meeting at Oberwolfach, not long afterwards, he had arrived even before me --- and I was quite early. From the Amsterdam visit I had been left with the impression that Albert was someone who always lost his way. However, he actually was quite well able to take care of himself.

Hungary had some outward effects: to my surprise he greeted my wife with "kiss your hands" (without actually doing it) --- in his fluent, but accented English. It turned out this was the literal translation of a commonly used Hungarian mode of greeting of ladies.

In 1991 he invited me to Debrecen (October 24 -- November 8). My wife and I arrived in Budapest by train, at the end of the morning; Albert fetched us from the station and took us out for lunch. Almost the first thing we heard that he was now a widower. After the lunch we went to the lecture room, in a house where a newly founded Institute was housed --- I forgot the name, but it represented an attempt of the computer scientists of the Academy to go commercial and earn some money with their expertise --- a sign of the changing times. The lecture was for a very small audience in a room about the size of our living room.

The next day Albert travelled with us by train to Debrecen. Not as spectacular as Budapest, but a town with an interesting history, and perhaps more typically Hungarian than cosmopolitan Budapest. The first few days we stayed at the "Sport Hotel", but after that we could move to the guest house of the Academy in town. Albert carried our trunks. Although he limped, due to the fact that he could not bend the knee of one leg, he walked as fast as anyone, and managed the heavy trunks which were somewhat too heavy for us to carry any distance.

It turned out there was not much to do for me professionally in Debrecen --- Albert was the only logician with any theoretical interest, for the rest the Faculty was very much application-oriented. Moreover, Albert had a very busy schedule, so there was not much time to talk shop. In addition he did not think much of my latest interest: linear logic. It turned out that the invitation was really meant to do us a good turn, to give us a bit of a holiday, in return for the invitation to Amsterdam. This I found difficult; I always have the feeling that when paid for a scientific visit, I ought to earn it by doing something actually useful - a friend and colleague once jokingly described my attitude as "calvinistic". But once

having overcome my sense of duty, we enjoyed ourselves very much. Notwithstanding his busy schedule, Albert was good host and organized some trips. One day we went to see the puszta near Hortobagy, together with two colleagues from the math institute, one of which had a car. It was a very nice day, Albert showing an almost childlike innocent (not childish) pleasure in the outing. Another memory is of a Russian breakfast he made for us at his home, with tea from the samowar.

After this, we did not meet again in person, and contact lapsed somewhat, since Albert was not a letterwriter. A planned visit to Amsterdam for the purpose of studying didactics of computer science did not materialize, because funds could not be found. Then I heard that he had married for the third time; and indeed, he did not strike me as someone who would could bear to live alone for a long time. And now, suddenly his death in Debrecen.

I don't know whether these memories manage to give an idea of Albert for those who have never met him. But I know that I shall remember him as long as I am in the possession of all my faculties.