

Rencontres Claude Itzykson

For those of you who came to know Claude, the words are dispensable, and the occasion today, sufficient to recall his memory. However I imagine that today the vast majority of you have not known Claude Itzykson, except, perhaps, through his works or textbooks. It is for me a great source of joy. It means that this Conference now lives a life of its own.

If I linger along this thought, I may imagine a postdoc in several decades, out of sheer curiosity, enquiring about who the Claude Itzykson from the conference was. I wonder what would happen if this young physicist, like Nobel Prize recipient Patrick Modiano in chase of missing Dora Bruder, was to find while cleaning his new office in Saclay the worn leather suitcase my father had been keeping lifelong at his side. He would find family letters written in German, Yiddish or French, forged identity cards dating back to the Occupation, pictures of Claude with his father, such as this one on their last birthday party together before Sacha Itzykson's deportation.

Perhaps enquiring on the life of Claude Itzykson, would he put together the scattered pieces of the puzzle, from the mandolin lessons taught in the Orphan Home by dedicated yet demanding educators, to the letter received from a young Russian physics student in the late 80s that lead to the discovery of a family branch thought destroyed by the Holocaust, and to their exfiltration to the West in the middle of Glasnost. Maybe our tenacious postdoc, would, like Claude did thirty years ago, rediscover through an article in "the Mathematical Intelligencer", the photo album taken in 1885 on the occasion of the 70th Birthday of Karl Weierstrass, where photos have been taken by a self-taught mathematician by the name of Carl Itzykson.

Alas I am not, or not yet, the inspired writer for such a story. Nor am I the rigorous historian of science able to dissect the contributions Claude Itzykson made to his many research fields. What his research was about, to me, evaporates in the fumes of childhood remembrances. Walking along a Corsican beach, I will be harnessed by the image of Claude wading about the beach in Cargese with a colleague, and repeatedly in the conversion, I will hear a phrase pronounced by Claude's characteristic French accent: "Zeta Function". Zeta Function.

Thus I am reduced to the role of a witness, a partial one, the kind of witness with ambiguous or interpretative testimony who, in detective novels, usually leads the investigator along the wrong track until the very last twist in the plot.

As such I can only share with you what I grasp of Claude's way of being a man of science. First, Claude told me he had chosen physics because it was the course he had greatest difficulties with in high school. Having tested this rule myself, I have come to the realization that this simple heuristics not only leads to a happy scientific life, but also that finding so to speak a "good problem" is an issue in one's life that extends beyond the professional sphere.

Claude, at least in his late years, told me he had come to walk at the frontier between Physics and Mathematics, and in his way of telling me this, it was clear to me that this territory was sometimes subject to what political correctness would refer to as "minor border incidents". Crossing borders,

exploring foreign, possibly dangerous territories seem to have been a great theme in his life. Well I guess, in his intellectual life, if I remember properly his taste and aptitude for physical outreaching through skiing or trekking.

I think the border-crossing story also had to do with sharing a good coffee, piece of chalk and cigarette with a newcomer. I reckon Claude was happy organizing courses and seminars, never neglecting that scientific life stems from interactions between the cells that compose its living body. In that prospect, I am very glad that Claude has left his name to a Conference, or to a Conference room, rather than, say, to some sort of individual award.

But in the end, I think at the very heart of Claude enthusiasm for physics and science was plain and simple wondering, fascination, bewilderment in the front of the beauties of the world. Beauty of numbers, when telling his children the famous story of young Gauss and arithmetic series. Beauty of nature, when taking a stroll amidst falling leaves in Burgundy in Autumn, or simply with the shape of soap bubbles. Does it come to a surprise that his children have been searching for these shapes, these symmetries, in biology, sculpture, or even fashion design?

Enjoying music, literature, or poetry were like breathing air to him. In Paris fancy diners Claude sometimes attended after (rather reluctantly) moving to the posher western area of the city, Claude would often introduce himself to foreigners as a failed writer or a failed musician. At home, in the early morning, he would be secluded in his office lost in clouds of cigarette smoke, but on the table of the living room, there remained books amidst orange peels and empty grapes, and these books have remained through the years as so many clues to the worried curiosity, the indefinite sadness that animated him. Let me finally share with you one I recently stumbled upon, from German-speaking, Romanian poet Paul Celan's Toddesfuge.

*Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped.*

To those of us today who were brutally ripped off Claude's presence twenty years ago, this is what this three-day conference is about: shoveling a grave in the air there he won't lie too cramped.