Dominique Foata ran a meeting on combinatorics and special functions at Oberwolfach about 15 years ago. Marco Schützenberger was there, and this is when we first méet. I am a very old fashioned classical analyst who gets a headache when around cigarette smoke. Marco had a cigarette in his hand almost all the time, and his mathematics included such things as semi-groups, something that was far too general and abstract for me, or so I thought. It seemed unlikely we would have anything to talk about. In fact, as his many friends can guess, we had much to talk about, and the cigarette smoke didn't even matter.

During one of the talks at this meeting, Marco was sitting immediately behind me. The speaker had come to this meeting with the conviction that he was 75% of the way through the first purely combinatorial proof of a famous result. The talk had started with this claim and was followed by the statement that Curtis Greene had made a comment to the speaker that allowed him to cut the remaining distance in half. After the talk, I turned around and told Marco that it seemed the decimal point was off by two places, at best. He replied that after that talk, he doubted the result was true and would put it on his computer when he returned to Paris. In the few conversations we had, he always had a better way of describing something than I did.

There was one other talk at that meeting where Marco said something to me which showed the type of man he was. Mourad Ismail was talking on some joint work we had done. He was giving a slow introduction, and after about 15 minutes, Marco turned to me and asked what was the big deal, since everything said so far came out directly from one of the big combinatorial structures he had help build. I told him to wait until the end, and see if he still felt that way. Some speakers like to give the audience a chance to follow along for a while, and Mourad was doing that. At the end, Marco said that the last part did not fit into anything he had seen, which reassured me. He would tell you what he thought, both good or not, and he could change his mind.

Marco's wife was at this meeting, and it was also a great pleasure to talk with her. Wives of mathematicians have a tendency to complain that their husbands ignore them, talking or doing mathematics all of the time. I had been her husband had started as a psychiatrist, I asked which made the better husband, a mathematician or a psychiatrist. She said a mathematician, since they just leave you alone.

The one other time we talked was in Paris, but only for an hour. He told me things about Poisson processes and their connections with problems which interested me that I had never dreamed of.

As we grow older, we learn to appreciate things we never thought we would. Marco's coding of MacMahon's inversion statistic on words via non-commutative multiplication once seemed like a weird way of doing something which had a beautiful analytic structure. Now it is seen as central to the development of some important examples of quantum groups. The q-special function I have studied for the last twenty years are seen to live in this non-commutative setting. His insight was remarkable, and often far ahead of others.

It would have been nice to have had more contacts, but those that occurred will not be forgotten.

Richard Askey
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