

István Németi 70 Party, Budapest, 9 September 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Just now, I was tongue-tied in our official lecture hall, for lack of a vital ingredient that has made words flow throughout human history: namely, alcohol. But here we are, glass in hand, and I would like to say a few things to István. In my lecture yesterday, I talked about logic and content, and my admiration for István's seminal turn to hard core physics. This move was recommended to me as well, by family members trying to save me from logic in my declining years, though it has never left the stage of daydreaming. But this evening, I want to speak about emotion and personality.

Our relation goes back a long time, including my family. This has resulted in some remarkable milestones for the van Benthems. The first time we came to Budapest at the invitation of Hajnal and István, I took my sons to the castle museum across the river, and droned on, as I always did during our travels, about European history and culture. They then rebelled in the cellar of the castle (I can still show you the exact spot), refusing to move, and explaining to me that I did not understand the meaning of the simple Dutch word "vacation". My loving sons made it clear this moment was a watershed, and that they would no longer come on holidays unless I changed my ways. I did, and Budapest will always be associated for me with that cultural mini-revolution. Actually, our visit was very nice, including a swim in the Danube, and football with the Hungarian math students, who were obviously multi-talented.

But what about the other direction, István in Amsterdam? I think we will all agree that the secret of scientific influence is intellectual power plus maintaining a certain mystery. Hajnal and István had taken up residence in a small pension near our institute, to prepare their courses, and work with individual people. I vividly remember having to enter that room through a dark blanket which they had fixed to the door – like in the ancient mysteries of Eleusis – since István had a theory that the slightest currents of Dutch air would be fatal to his health. Once through the blanket, one would be greeted with cups of strong hot coffee. Our collaboration on the Guarded Fragment belongs to my cherished memories, and I learnt a lot. It also changed my view of algebraic logicians. Some followers of that religion radiate a feeling that, if you have not understood a topic algebraically, you have not understood it at all. But

Hajnal and István were always open to other methods and perspectives. I learnt that, sometimes, the high priests of a religion are those who are the most relaxed about it.

But it is not just me. István and Hajnal have of course been immensely successful in influencing many people. Just to mention one, the current director of my institute ILLC in Amsterdam is Yde Venema, who spent a decisive formative period in Budapest. One part of that broad influence comes again with a mystery. We all know the famous group lecture performances of Hajnal, István and Ildikó, where mathematics was sparkling in interaction. Like with other great religions in history, people have theorized, and even quarreled, about the precise division of labor in that Hungarian Trinity. It is not the place here for me to delve more deeply into these mysteries, but let me just say one thing. These performances show us mathematics as it really is, a lively conversation between sparkling minds. How on earth did we end up with that dreary idea that mathematics is essentially about producing strings of formulas that logicians have the nerve to call ‘proofs’? One videotape of a lecture by these three colleagues tells us more about living mathematics than years of formula pushing.

István, we have many parallel interests and some joint achievements I am proud of. But the real glue of successful communication is emotion. You and your group have been very important to me, and to many other people in my world. I thank you for that, I am happy to be here, and I wish you a very happy 70th birthday!

Johan van Benthem