A TRIBUTE TO OUR FRIEND

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Life well spent is long
– Leonardo da Vinci

It was our great privilege to know Michael (Misha) Marinov since the fifties, when we were students at the Physics Department of the Moscow University (we graduated in 1962).

He was a noble soul and a brilliant mind.

Misha's unusual mental keenness, together with his intellectual honesty, made him a distinguished theoretical physicist, who published about 70 original papers, many of which were fundamental and contained seeds of later development.

He was a versatile person of universal knowledge. He loved reading, not limiting himself to professional literature. He appreciated and knew well belles lettres (in particular poetry) of many countries; being able to read several languages, he often read literary works in their original language. Thus he knew the works of many writers that were never, during the Soviet era, published in Russian translation (in particular, American Jewish writers).

Misha loved and knew music and arts; while living in Moscow, he was a regular visitor of concert halls and had a rich collection of artistic books and albums at home.

He was hearty and charming and his company was an enriching experience.

He had a special pedagogical talent, and knew how to explain the most complicated things in simple words. His superb lectures have become imprinted in the memory of his students and his colleagues.

His self-education included, in addition to math and sciences, philosophy, linguistics, international relations, history. His ability to see the true nature of things and inner relationships between them enabled him not only to become a distinguished scientist, but to foresee historic developments. For example, he called the Soviet Union a "Colossus on legs of clay" and predicted its collapse.

Misha was raised in a Zionist family that cherished the Jewish heritage, which was rather uncommon in the Soviet Union at that time. He liked very much to listen to cantorial music and sometimes was present at the services of the Moscow synagogue, together with his younger sister, though the authorities' response could have been very unfavorable.

From early youth, he was always proud of being a Jew.

His three uncles were active in the Russian Zionist movement and were punished for this by Soviet authorities and in the late twenties banished to Palestine. Misha was happy to know that his close relatives had taken part in establishing the State of Israel. He always saw Israel as his homeland; his perpetual dream was to live in the Jewish State.

In the early seventies the historical mass exodus of Soviet Jews began. It was then, in 1971, that one of us, Dan Roginsky, applied for an exit visa (and has been living in Israel since 1973). To his deep regret, Misha could not start his struggle to obtain permission for his family to leave at that time; his father Samuel Marinov worked in highly classified fields and knew that the authorities would never let him go. Misha was not ready to make his near and dear ones suffer because of his application for an exit permit, as often happened then. He and his family applied for permits to go to Israel in 1979 after his father's death.

Before applying he had to first resign from ITEP (he had been affiliated with the institute since 1962, first obtaining his Ph.D. and later working there) in order to prevent his friends and colleagues in ITEP from being troubled by the authorities.

Prior to quitting ITEP he composed a fundamental review paper "Path integrals in quantum theory: an outlook of basic concepts," but the regular way of submitting it for publication (through the institute) was not available to him after his resignation. So he had to send the paper to "Physics Reports" by two paths: 1) by the censored mail directly to the journal and 2) indirectly (he managed to send it to Israel, to one of us). He was sure that it was due to this "double path" that his paper had reached the journal and was published there during the first year of his "refusenik" life. In the last sentence of that paper he let the readers know about his own "path", about his "intention to settle in the Promised Land of my Fathers."

Their exit permit was denied. He became a "refusenik". His mother and his sister Ina Kwartin with her family were then refuseniks, too.

The status of a refusenik in the late USSR was accompanied with deprivation and harassment, against a background of serious danger. Fortunately, many of his ITEP colleagues remained his friends during those years, in particular the late Mikhail Terentev and the family of Alexander and Inna Dolgov, who did their best to help Misha.

During almost eight difficult years Misha earned a living for his family (wife Lilia and daughters Masha and Dina) working as a construction worker and as a translator. He never complained and always declined any financial help. Once, while working as a construction worker, he fell down from the roof and broke his leg (it was a complicated fracture). After this accident one of us arranged for a Western guest to visit him, bringing a modest but essential subsidy from a public fund. He refused to accept it. Time and again he wrote in his letters, "Don't worry, we need nothing but patience and hope."

Here are the words of a letter he wrote in 1985: "Egypt has been left behind. We will continue on our way through the desert, hoping that our 40 years will be shorter than those of the biblical Exodus."

In spite of the hard physical labor, he carried on his research work in theoretical physics, though he could only do it at home. He produced valuable results under those difficult conditions and published remarkable papers in Western journals.

At the same time he volunteered as a teacher at an "underground university" for young Jewish students barred from universities by the Soviet authorities because of state anti- Semitism.

During these years he also taught several short courses in theoretical physics for specialists. In February of 1987, on the eve of his departure for Israel, Misha wrote in a letter that Andrei Sakharov (who returned from exile in December 1986) sat in on his lecture on superstrings: "He was sitting in the first row and jotting down notes carefully."

Though he was a prominent scientist, Michael was not sure that his qualification as a physicist would be needed by his new country (Israel) and was glad that his "new qualification as a construction worker" might let him "become helpful to the country."

Being a refusenik in USSR over such a long time is a severe test of personal integrity; few people passed this test as courageously as Michael Marinov did.

Misha and his family came to Israel in the spring of 1987 and after a year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem he joined Technion and they moved to Haifa. As a full professor, Misha combined very successfully teaching with his research work, he published fifteen scientific papers.

Ten years later he was suddenly struck down by cancer.

Michael ascribed his cancer to a high dose of radiation, which he had accidentally received from "post-nuclear-test" rain in 1957. It was then that Moscow University students were sent by the Soviet authorities to work for some months as agricultural laborers in Khrushchev's famous "tselina" (virgin lands) in Kazakhstan.

Sometimes at night the students could observe spectacular auroras, though this phenomenon does not generally occur at those low latitudes. In a few days Misha was caught bareheaded under rain, got wet to his skin and soon after that lost much of his thick hair for some time. When he reached Moscow, other signs of the "radiation sickness" could be seen on him too, and this disease undoubtedly undermined his health. As became known much later, nuclear test areas were located not far from where the students were staying at the "tselina", and the auroras originated from one of the high-power Soviet nuclear tests in the atmosphere.

Michael Marinov's agonizing struggle against the fatal illness ended on January 17, 2000. To the last day of his life he demonstrated the noble features of his character. He never complained. He continued to care about others, including his students, even when he was hospitalized during his last weeks. With deep regret (and even as though blaming himself) he talked about lacking time to help his Ph.D. student to finalize his thesis.

It was on December 18, 1999, a month before his death, that one of us (Dan Roginsky) saw Misha for the last time. Suffering from his sickness, and with full knowledge of imminent death, he talked to his friends not about himself, but about Israel, whose very existence he considered, not without grounds, under great threat. This, not his own life, was the main topic of his concern.

The proverb "the best is the enemy of the good" was not for him. He strived for excellence in every field of his activity, and attained it, in particular in scientific research and education.

Michael Marinov was an outstanding human being, a rare combination of acute intellect, encyclopedic knowledge and deep insight, with honesty, dignity, dedication, and self-mastery. He was a man of genuine devotion to his family, to his friends, to his homeland, to his views and ideals, and to science.

We will miss him forever.

God bless his memory!