

Peter Sarnak

I first heard of Israel Gelfand while still an undergraduate in South Africa .One of my teachers D.B.Sears (who was one of the few students of the British analyst E.Titchmarsh and worked on spectral theory of differential operators) gave a course on Gelfand's theory of Banach Algebras.The course was aimed at showing the power of this elegant theory and its broad applications and it left a tremendous impression on me -it was the first piece of modern mathematics that I had seen.Since then the story has been the same, in almost any direction that I venture I find that Gelfand has been there,and that he and his coworkers have played a central role in shaping the subject. I first met Gelfand in Israel in 1987.I think this was his first trip to Israel and he came there among other things to receive the Wolf Prize that had been awarded to him years earlier. At a party in his honor at the Institute for advanced study in Jerusalem, after looking carefully at the women present he singled out my wife as someone he wanted to meet.While wondering just exactly what he had in mind ,it was explained to me that my wife was roughly the same size as his wife and that he wanted her to come with him to the old city in Jerusalem to try on various garments that he was thinking of buying as presents for his wife.Off they went and apparently all worked out very well(I guess Tatiana can clarify if she liked what she got). I met Gelfand on many occasions after that and had many engaging and enlightening mathematical discussions with him. He had a remarkable mathematical intuition which allowed him to get to the bottom of almost any issue,even he had not thought about it before.This very striking quality of Gelfand was very much appreciated by both Piatetski-Shapiro and Joseph Bernstein who are responsible for my "Gelfand number" being equal to two. One vivid memory of Gelfand that I have is from his 90-th birthday conference in Harvard a few years ago. It was amazing to see such a large number of well known mathematicians describe how much they owed to Gelfand mathematically and otherwise. His theorems ,ideas and suggestions had impacted in major way those who were gathered at the conference and to whom he was a great leader. His mathematics however extends much further, with a similar impact on all mathematicians.With his passing the world has lost one of the finest mathematicians of the last century .His mathematics will live on for as long as the humans continue to doing mathematics.

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