Resolution on the Death of PROFESSOR Jal Choksi

Faculty of Science Members (or Principal Munroe-Blum, Senators)

It is with regret that I must inform the Faculty (or Senate) that Professor Jal Choksi died on March 30, 2011.

Jal Choksi joined the Department of Mathematics and Statistics in 1968, first as a visiting professor, then on the regular staff from 1971, becoming a Full Professor in 1976 and an Emeritus Professor in 2000. His path to McGill was a long one. Born into Bombay’s Parsi community in 1932, he moved to England in the 1950’s, first obtaining an undergraduate degree in Mathematics at Cambridge in 1954, then a doctorate in Mathematics at Manchester in 1957. From then, he had a six-year stint at the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research in Bombay in the early sixties, then temporary appointments at Yale and Illinois.

Jal’s area of research was mathematical analysis, and in particular ergodic theory, an abstraction of problems arising in statistical physics, whose concern is what happens to physical systems as they are allowed to run for a long time. This is a deep and difficult area of mathematics, where the significant questions are often formidably difficult to tackle. The development of this subject during the 20th century was shaped by the contributions of Poincare, Birkhoff, Von Neumann, Kolmogoroff, Sinai and Kakutani. Jal’s work was well respected by the leaders in the field. In particular, he was invited to Yale by Kakutani, with whom he had a successful research collaboration. Jal’s knowledge of classical analysis was broad and deep, and his scholarship was exemplary. His last paper, written after he became an Emeritus Professor and published in l’Enseignement Mathematique, is a masterly account of Vitali’s Convergence Theorem on term by term integration, in which he untangles the precise nature of the contributions made by Lebesgue, Beppo Levi, Fatou and Riesz, bringing to light some facts which were not captured in Hawkins’ otherwise excellent treaty on the history of Lebesgue integration.

It is a sign of the esteem in which he was held by his colleagues that he was the person chosen in 1979 to replace Edward Rosenthal as Chair. Rosenthal started as Chair in 1962, occupied the position for 17 years, and was the Department’s father figure, and so Jal’s tenure as Chair was a major transition. His time marked the beginning of the Department’s program of academic renewal, after the mid-seventies doldrums. He continued, after his stint as Chair, as a valued advisor on the Department’s academic development.

If one should describe Jal’s way of being in a few words, it is one of calm wisdom, combined with amusement at the world’s follies, with the odd sign of irritation showing through. He cared deeply about his job, and in particular about students; they often confided in him, and he was mentor to more than one. Jal supervised four Ph.D. students over the course of his career, and he kept close relations with each of them. His breadth of knowledge was wide, and not only of mathematics, but also of literature, and in particular of music, in which his knowledge was encyclopaedic, and deep; a passion that went all the way back to his youth. An anecdote amongst many that reveals the depth of his knowledge of music concerns the coda of the first movement of the Beethoven violin concerto, where Jal knew the precise differences in the orchestral score between the various versions composed by Beethoven, and could comment with authority on the choices made by the main interpreters of this concerto since the early recordings of Fritz Kreisler, issued in the 1920’s.

The Faculty of Science (or Senate) extends its condolences to Jal Choksi’s beloved wife, Shernaz, his children Rustum, Anjali and Jahangir, their partners and his grandchildren.