

My friend Pavel Šiffel

On a cold winter day of 1982, I was preparing to go to a train station to meet our new graduate student from Czechoslovakia. A long-term negotiation with the administration, huge amount of paperwork, and the construction of a new home made spectrofluorometer were over and I was ready for new exciting experiments. Suddenly the door opened and an elegant young man with short hair around his face appeared. "Hi, I am Pavel Šiffel" he said, "Do you have a cup of tea for me?" (He never drank coffee.) It seemed as if we knew each other for ages.

Pavel was very easy with people, and people liked him, even strangers talked to him often, asked his opinion and listen to him carefully. "Do you understand everything that they say?" I asked him. "Yes" he laughed, "Russian and Czech words have the same root, though Ukrainian language is easier for me". He created a supporting people aura, was like a magnetic pole, a magic center that attracts people.

Pavel liked work, and he was dedicated to science. He generated a lot of ideas and always wanted to prove them. For him an idea and the experiment were two hands of the same body. "Simplicity is the beauty of Nature, and we have to find it". He always wore a black lab coat. "Bright light has too many side reflections, you cannot see the core".

Extraordinary people usually think in an extraordinary way. That's what allows them to design extraordinary experiments. That is what allows them to make discoveries. For example he said, "The temperature at night is usually lower than at the day time. The lower temperature slows down the metabolic activity. That's why nobody can see what is going in light adapted plants. Why don't we increase the night temperature and decrease the day temperature in our green house?" The result was the discovery of a new mechanism of protochlorophyllide photoreduction in light adapted plants. Another example, "Even at very careful chloroplast isolation the supernatant is usually slightly green. Is there chlorophyll degradation, or some kind of water-soluble chlorophyll-protein?" The result was the discovery of a new chlorophyll-protein complex.

The next year summer was very hot in Moscow. The temperature often comes to the middle 30 °C. But official regulations did not allow foreigners to go farther than 50 km (30 miles) from the city. "We have done a lot and we cannot do experiments at this temperature. Have you ever been to a sea?" I asked him. "Never, why?" "You cannot fly, but you do not need your passport for buying a train ticket, do you? You speak Russian well and look like a person from a Baltic Republic of the USSR. Shall we try?" "Sure." I was personally responsible for his stay in Moscow and understood the possible consequence of this action for both of us very well. But we were young, and crazy, and believed that rules are designed for ordinary people. Later he said that our two weeks in Crimea were one of the best times in his life.

To prepare samples for his experiments, Pavel had to spend a lot of time in a cold room. At that time a new pretty undergrad from Kyrgyzstan appeared in our Institute. She was also doing biochemical experiments. And she also did them in the cold room. The consequences of this coincident are two beautiful kids, though they appeared much later. (I still keep a nice pencil drawing of a horse with a word KAMILKA above).

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