

A Last Conversation with Cora

Aline Bonami

Abstract I cannot contribute to this volume without speaking of Cora and what her friendship meant to me. But I know that, would she be here, she would ask: “Raconte-moi tes maths,” that is, “what are you doing right now?” Because, first of all, she was a mathematician. My mathematical contribution tends to answer her question.

I probably met Cora for the first time at El Escorial in 1979. We immediately started a friendly conversation, which went over years. Each time we met again, at a conference or when she visited Paris area, we continued as if there had been no interruption. We always spoke French, which she liked. She had no accent at all, which was at first surprising: it was only from some hesitation in the choice of words that one understood that French was not her mother language. She had spent 1 or 2 years in Paris while a very young child, in the immediate after war period and she liked to remind that time. I remember her, for instance, telling me that their house caretaker had never crossed the Seine River. I had the impression she was speaking of some mythic city, where time stays still, even if I was only a few years younger and lived in Paris area since the early 1950s. During her last stays in Paris she visited regularly Marie-Hélène Schwartz, whom she knew from her early childhood. She came back happy, and somehow serene, to have spent some time with this kind figure of her past, then a very old lady—who finally survived Cora a couple of years.

The conversation of Cora was brilliant, witty, full of life, sometimes intense. We spoke of everything: science or careers, politics and history, colleagues and women in mathematics, and harmonic analysis, of course. She was curious of everything. “Raconte-moi” (tell me), she would ask. And I went to the blackboard and explained what I was doing. We passed from one subject to another, leaving maths to come back 5 min later, as one can do between friends. It is sometimes easier to confide to

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a friend one does not meet on an everyday basis. This is how it was between us: a real friendship. At times she spoke of the exile, and the injury it causes, the loss one feels for life. I had only lived it in books. I then lived it through her words. But the next moment we joked gaily again.

I visited her at Howard University in 1981 and met Daniel for the first time. I remind the three of us laughing together after a performance of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” the staging of which we had found ridiculous. We met at MSRI in 1988 (I recall the beach, with Cora, Daniel, and Corasol), then in Oberwolfach. I remember her persuading me to leave for Paris early on Friday afternoon. I had my car and we drove back with Guy David and Stéphane Jaffard, stopping for a lively and cheerful dinner. Cora came to my home that night and succeeded immediately to charm the whole family. In the late 1990s Daniel and Cora spent nearly each year a few days in Paris and we met regularly. I took them once to a horse show, which was not that successful and became another source of jokes between us. But unfortunately illness imperceptibly changed them year after year.

I called her from time to time, not enough, certainly. She replied in her deep, warm voice. “Comme je suis contente de t’entendre !”¹ We met for the last time in 2005, in Washington, where I stopped for half a day on my way back from Buenos Aires. I called her early in the morning. We met and walked quietly through the city, chatting happily as ever. It was our last conversation.

¹I am so glad to hear you!