A Celebration of László Fuchs on his 90th Birthday

And still they gaz'd and still the wonder grew

That one small head could carry all he knew.

(Oliver Goldsmith, The Village Schoolmaster)

It is not my purpose here today to try to give you an insight into László Fuchs, the eminent mathematician and algebraist; others have done this today and on previous occasions. Rather, I would like to focus on László the man, explaining why it is that so many, both mathematicians and non-mathematicians, have travelled to be here today to celebrate his recent 90th birthday. Let me say at the outset that this is not a simple task, not for the usual reasons of trying to select the correct and insightful things to say, but rather because for most of us who know László through mathematics – like me - it is difficult to make this a singular task: László without Shula makes as little sense as discussing one half of any great partnership: Mickey without Minnie, Burton without Taylor, Mork without Mindy, Beauty without the Beast (oh, that's in the wrong order!) or Lady without the Tramp!

Nevertheless, I should begin, as all good accounts should, at the beginning; this, of course, means the beginning from my perspective. I first met László, and indeed many others who have become my good friends, at a conference in the Villa Madruzzo, Trento in May 1980. Of course, I knew who he was – he was the famous and surely deadly serious, severe professor who had written that lovely book on ordered structures I had come across as an undergraduate, as well as the 3 books on Abelian groups that I had studied so carefully in Oxford, while I was a beginner who was attending his first specialist conference. How wrong can you be? I had been a student of Tony Corner who, at that time, was suffering badly from depression and had become somewhat reclusive, so my hunch was that I would get a reasonable welcome into the circle since I could give reports on Tony's latest work. My hunch was correct but what I didn't expect was László's reaction: after asking me about Tony, he

apologised and said that I must, of course, tell him all about my own work. He listened carefully and gave me great encouragement to continue. I was later to realise that this was the true image of László. At Trento, I also learned for the first time about Hungarian humour, but more of that later.

My second recollection is of meeting Lászlo, Shula, Terry and David in Oberwolfach in August 1985 – I had been at his pre-60th birthday celebration in Udine the previous April - but this was László the family man, clearly enjoying his children interacting with new friends while they struggled with the difficulties of Irish accents! My own children, now adults with families of their own, were with Ann and me on that occasion and they often talk about that trip as one of their most enjoyable childhood holidays; indeed, when they heard about this event, they asked me to convey their warmest regards to the Fuchs family. Shula and Ann became firm friends and have enjoyed each others company at many conferences since.

Another incident I recall illustrates a further side of László: a caring protective father-like figure to young students. I had a young student giving his first talk to an Abelian group conference. He was, of course, nervous but things looked like they might begin to unravel for him when someone in the audience began to tackle him very aggressively about the point he was trying to illustrate, saying that it was not at all clear that his interpretation was correct. Fortunately, László was chairing the session and he immediately countered that "it was clear to him", thereby defusing the situation. Of course the questioner had a point, possibly even a very good point, but László was not going to allow anyone to attack a young beginning researcher in such an aggressive way. I've always felt that that particular intervention was László laying down a marker which had the result that Abelian Group and Module Theory conferences are still devoid of the rancour that one finds in other areas of mathematics.

I mentioned earlier Hungarian humour and one my greatest surprises as I got to know László, was his wonderful, mischevious sense of humour: he always had a joke to tell over coffee or dinner. So I felt that it would be inappropriate if I didn't bring him something for this evening. Now humour, while a universal human quality, is very much tied to cultural backgrounds and these days one

runs the risk of being terribly "politically incorrect"! I came across a one-liner which I think would appeal to László but which I hope does not offend anyone:

A successful man is one who earns more than his wife can spend; a successful woman is one who can find such!
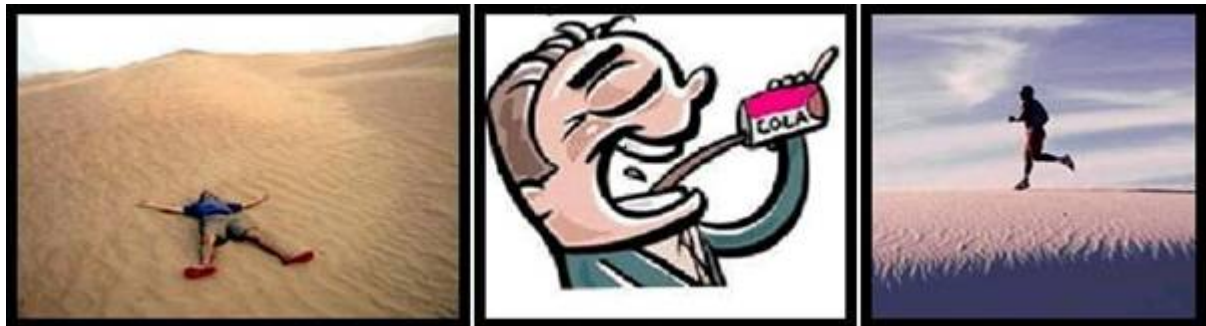
A less risky one is, I hope, the following:

A disappointed Irish salesman of Coca-Cola returned from his assignment to Jerusalem .

A friend asked," Why weren't you successful in Israel?"
The Irish man explained, "When I got posted, I was very confident that I would make a good sales pitch.
But I had a problem. I didn't know how to speak Hebrew. So I planned to convey the message through three posters.

First poster: A man lying in the hot desert sand totally exhausted and fainting.
Second poster: The man is drinking Coca-Cola.
Third poster: Our man is now totally refreshed.
And then these posters were pasted all over the place.

"Terrific! That should have worked!" said the friend.

"The hell it should have!" said the Irish man.
"No one told me they read from right to left!"

My final point is the most shocking of all. Did you know that László, like the best rock and roll or movie stars has a following of groupies? They show up at every conference, are mostly women and are organised by no less a person than Shula, often aided and abetted by own wife, Ann! They even have a name: the accompanying persons' group. Whilst I have seen the phenomenon in other areas of mathematics, I don't think I have ever seen it to such a degree when László Fuchs is not present! They have even been known to turn up for his "concluding remarks" summary at conferences! Joking apart, the fact that we have such a wonderful "parallel" group at our conferences is surely down to the inclusiveness exuded by László and Shula.

It has been a pleasure to know László and his family for the last thirty odd years and to have had the opportunity to enjoy his company both mathematically and socially at so many events.

Just because you are now 90, doesn't mean that we are allowing you to stop. May I ask you to raise your glasses to wish László a very happy birthday and many more occasions such as today.

Brendan Goldsmith,

New Orleans,

September 14th 2014.