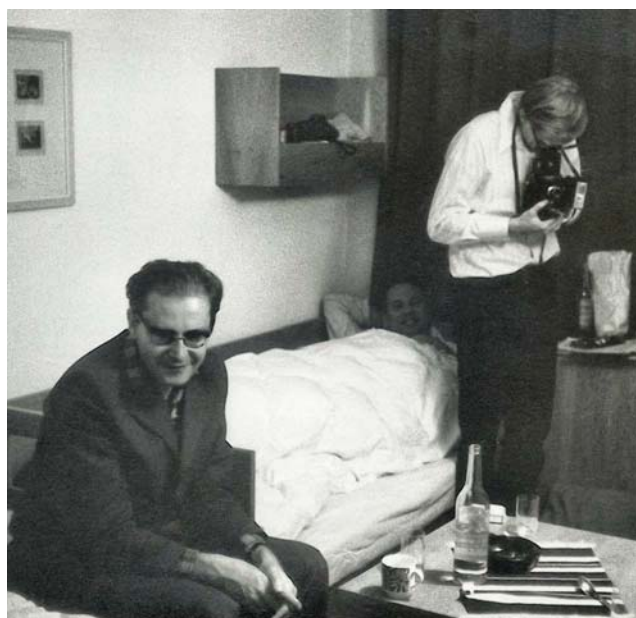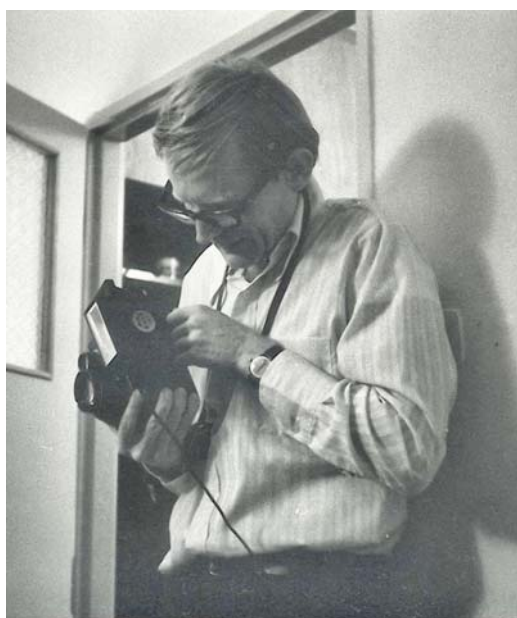# Štefan Schwabik,
a friend for all seasons
(by Jean Mawhin)

Between my first meeting with Stefan in Brno, at Equadiff 3 of 1972, and the last occasion to enjoy Stefan's wonderful company, in Brno again, at Equadiff 12 of 2009, the world had dramatically changed. But Stefan had definetely remained the same.

He liked mathematical conferences and enjoyed attending them. There are many reasons to attend a conference : to communicate your last results, to show how good a mathematician you are, to learn in priority new exciting results, or, even, to make nice excursions. For Stefan, the main reason was to meet people, to watch people, to meet old friends and make new ones. For this incredibly lucid observer of mankind in general, and of the mathematical microcosm in particular, a conference was an exceptional laboratory. His passion for photography

(the sequence of his cameras is both a political and a technical history of the last forty years) was always, and almost uniquely, a passion for taking snapshots of friends and people. It is fortunate that Stefan, in due time, has transmitted the virus to his good friend Milan.

My first point of contact with Stefan was a common friend, the late Svatopluk Fučík, whose seminal work in nonlinear analysis was familiar to me, before our meeting in Brno. The tragic destiny of Svatopluk deeply affected Stefan and I could soon measure his disponibility and generosity when, after Svatopluk's death, we tried to help his family.

This Equadiff 4 in Brno was the beginning of a long love story with Czechoslovakia and Czech mathematicians. Stefan was most emblematical in this respect. Before the iron curtain fell down, visiting Czechoslovakia was the only way to meet Stefan. It took me some time to learn how difficult and painful the communist period had been for him. I learned it from his friends, not from him. Stefan liked to speak, as you know, but not to tell his life. You could just learn funny anecdotes or events that had touched him, his family, his colleagues, and, of course, his dog. Complaining was orthogonal to his way of thinking and he remained exactly the same despite of the changing environment. Neither his freedom of thinking, nor his lucidity were negociable.

Another recipe of Stefan was his unique sense of humor, a type of humor that only blossoms in small countries, where the concept of grandeur is replaced by that of derision. I do not know if Stefan, always dressed in an elegant classical way, was aware of his aristocratic look. My wife, like many women, enjoyed very much his company.

Margaret told me once that Stefan was born to be a prince, realized that it was impossible, and decided to be a clown. But it took not long for him to become the prince of clowns. He definitely prefered serious things told in a witty way, to empty words told with a solemnel voice.

He could only be serious in discussing the quality of drinks.

He always prefered traditional folksongs to national hymns.

He was always ready to initiate or join the funniest jokes.

Laughing with him was a fantastic medicine.

Stefan's office in the Mathematical Institute has always been the strong attractor of this venerable institution. If you paid him a visit, it did no take long, through some strange telepathy, to be joined by most of his colleagues.

There the prince of clowns became the prince of magicians, changing almost instantaneously mathematical books into excellent drinks. It was also an opportunity to discover Stefan's most recent gadgets.

For several years, Stefan's mathematical interests and mine were not specially close, and our relations were much more friendly than professional. When, in the second half of the seventies, my interest for integration, and in particular for some integral growing in the meadows of Bohemia, awaked, I realized that Stefan was more than an expert in this area. It did not take long for us to share a growing enthusiasm for this integral and a common admiration and affection for its father, Jaroslav Kurzweil.

Stefan's feelings for Jaroslav were not restricted to the mathematician. He loved so much that man sharing with him a sense of humor and a philosophy of life expressed differently, but having the same deep human roots. The student had learned from his master more than the generalized differential equations, and their complicity was exceptional.

My mathematical conversations with Jaroslav and Stefan have been an immense joy and enrichment. Again, the problem was to convince Stefan to speak about his own remarkable achievements. The same was true in history of mathematics, for which Stefan always showed a strong interest. It was for him another way of exploring the human side of mathematics, and the same was true for his commitments in various commitees and associations.

Each of us keeps and cultivates his own image of Stefan, and each of us agrees that he is unique. The slides, a very small selection of a large collection, have also shown some of his closed friends ; he cherished them and they cherished him. For me, Stefan remains the brother I never had. He not only was always there for the happiest moments I spent in this country, but he was an essential part of those happiest moments. I now share something more with all my friends in Czech Republic: the unique chance and happiness to have known and enjoyed for many years Stefan's wonderful personality.