

Remembering Charles Schulz Alena Hnidkova, PhD., Prague

Ed note: Jeannie Schulz thought the readership would enjoy this affectionate letter from one of Sparky's many friends.

It has been a year since Charles "Sparky" Schulz died, and I still somehow have not accepted the fact.

In Prague, Czech Republic, it is probably easier not to think of the loss. We were not given a chance to get used to his cartoons. My generation grew up under the communist regime, safe from "the dangerous influence from the Capitalist world". Even now, when at least one of (the) Prague newspapers publishes the Peanuts strip along with two more cartoons, people do not know much of the characters and most of them do not recognize the authors. Last year, a big MacDonald's advertisement referred to the gift Snoopy toys by saying, "Come and get a little doggie". (I have to say the four-frame strip has not much tradition here and definitely is not a part of country's culture, as it seems to be in the USA. What is more, to appreciate Peanuts, you really should know them well so that they become a part of your life.)

I was one of a few who had a chance to meet Peanuts many, many years ago. I showed a young American girl round Prague some time around 1967 and in turn, I was given four well-thumbed paperbacks with her beloved Charlie Brown, Snoopy and the gang. And I fell for them as well. They rather evoked smiles than laughter in me, and also strong feelings of sympathy, empathy and tenderness when one feels like opening one's arms saying "Oh no! Come here, my poor, poor little thing... I know how you feel - maybe only too well!" - which is the way I have been feeling about them ever since.

Another sheer coincidence - 23 years later, I met Jeannie, Sparky's wife, in Prague, we became friends and in May 1991, I went to see the Schulzes in their California home in Santa Rosa for the first time.

I knew by then that Peanuts were well known in the USA, and financially very successful, too, though I had no idea of how much so. I was in for a couple of surprises then.

Meeting Charles "Sparky" Schulz was the first one. Instead of a sedate, serious elderly man sitting in an office (and maybe even a little conceited rich man - or whatever it was I expected), I just watched the trim septuagenarian (almost) with a pair of "in-line" skates on, elegantly circling beside his studio (his daughter Jill was there, training kids as a part of (an) in-line skates promotion).

When I come to terms with his departure, I will miss him horribly. I will miss the man who spent his lunch break skating and who played ice hockey with his Santa Rosa Diamond Icers (70 years & over) with so much zeal.

All my other naive ideas about millionaires came to nothing. I do not know what I imagined - maybe a hectic life with parties in a magnificent mansion full of servants, maybe a bit of creative work and a lot of instructions given to an army of staff doing the actual drawing according to instructions, a Hollywood-star-life or something. I definitely did not imagine a millionaire would watch TV a bit in the evening, caressing his dog Andy, and then go to bed early to be able to get up early in the morning - to go to work, to spend the whole day in the studio, thinking out and drawing his strip or strips - unaided, of course - just to go back for another quiet evening, maybe after a restaurant dinner, maybe after a steak at home. Sparky's house is not a mansion - it is a very nice place, but surprisingly (an) unpretentious one, just like Sparky and his wife. I love it - It is nice and cozy and pleasant to live in, and it feels like home, Home with a capital H. (It actually fulfills my idea of a rich man's California house at least in one aspect - it is big though it does not look big, and it has a swimming pool.) I will miss this modest, quiet man, seated in a leather armchair, with the dog beside him, spending a quiet time in his beloved sanctuary of a home.

There is no army of staff either there or at One Snoopy Place, Santa Rosa. No busy anthill of a studio - just a couple of people taking care of the business side (and somewhere behind, some lawyers mostly attending to the Peanuts copyright matters). And there was just one man, in strict privacy of his office, insisting on creating his characters himself, from the scratch, often struggling to get things right. I will miss the man for whom his work meant so much. I know how sad he felt when people thought that being a cartoonist was an easy way of life and tended to underestimate it so crudely. I will never forget how hurt he was when a child came to him, pushed by the parents, a crumpled piece of a napkin in his hand and the stupid words from behind: "Ask him, he will surely draw a Snoopy cartoon for you, it means nothing to him."

And I will miss Sparky - the Inquisitor. Though he usually had his breakfast at the Redwood Empire Ice Arena on his way to work, we now and then used to have breakfast at home together, talking. At the beginning, there were just the usual questions about where we spent the day, how I liked my stay. Later on, the "testing" questions started. Being a psychologist, what do you think of this or that, of the generation gap, how do you deal with people's anxiety and uncertainty, what about the relationship between parents and children, about intolerance, indifference, violence, etc. etc. just asking questions, watching me intently and sometimes critically.

I felt as if I was going through an exam, only I did not know whether I passed. I was not sure if he was testing me or the level of psychology in the Czech Republic. Later on, I stopped feeling uneasy about it. I started to understand. He just wanted to know, that was all. (I did not know then what the tennis legend Billie Jean King would say after his sudden departure: "He would probe and probe and probe, ask questions all the time. We talked about our own insecurities, which are many. We talked about how anxious we both are," King said. "It was the Lucy in him, asking me. A little psychology here.")

When I came to see Jeannie and Sparky again in summer 1997, we felt much more relaxed in our talks. I learned a couple of things about him, but even then, I still was in for a couple of surprises. I read a lot about Sparky being shy and neurotic, and I supposed it would show in big gatherings and social events. It did not. Not at all. True, even there, he was quiet, very gentle and modest, but his behavior was perfect, he smiled a lot, always willing to talk to anyone. He looked at ease and he even made one think he was in his element. I do not know whether he really was, but he definitely looked quite at home before a special concert in 1997 where he talked to at least 60 people and managed to look very interested in what they had to say. When he took me to a big barbecue for about 2,000 participants of the 23rd Senior World Hockey Tournament he hosted in the Redwood Empire Ice Arena, he shook hands with about 90 people - before I stopped counting. After the meal, we went to see the clog dancers, and he got sort of imprisoned by a big group of guests from Japan. I had at least 35 cameras in my hands, and Sparky with his characteristic kind smile posed and posed for just another and another photograph... Who would not want a photo with Sparky! I will miss the feeling of being his guest - I was so proud!

In spite of the perfect polish of the man of the world, inside this rich and well-respected man, there was still a boy dreaming of all the wonderful things he would get one day. He enjoyed having turned the dreams into real things. I remember the gleam in his eyes when he was told about how amazed I was by his airplane, or when I sincerely praised his Jag... I am beginning to miss that charmed and charming little boy, too.

When Charles Schulz died, there were so many words said about the meaning of his work that it would be wasting time to think of anything new. What is more, I think I am not going to miss Sparky in my profession - his Peanuts will always be here with me. Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, a psychiatrist and a great writer, wrote three books where he took Sparky's comic strips to illustrate the life situations he talks about with his patients. Long before Sparky's death, he wrote in the Introduction to "I Didn't Ask To Be In This Family" ... "One such master of keen observation, you may be surprised to learn, is Charles Schulz, whose gift of understanding human behavior was not fettered by the restrictions of professionalism. ...I presented his brilliant insights into various psychological concepts. Comments from a number of students of human behavior and from practicing psychotherapists who are now utilizing Schulz's entertaining cartoon strips as an adjunct to therapy have confirmed my opinion that Schulz is one of the most gifted and insightful observers of human behavior known to us...." ([I Didn't Ask To Be In This Family](#), Topper Books, New York, 1992)

I do not pretend I really knew Sparky very well. But I was lucky to be given a chance to stay in his house for some time and I know some things at least. I think that some pieces of information about him are correct and some might be a bit exaggerated. I know it is true that traveling - and all changes - made him very nervous. When he learned I and my sister were about to take a tour of California, he was terrified. "12 days on a bus! A different hotel nearly every night! You will hate every minute of it! Why don't you just stay here with us?"

By that time, my father died suddenly and no one could have done so much for me and been more sympathetic in so few words. When we arrived in Santa Rosa, he waited for us in the garage door. "Welcome home" were the only words he said. And this is the Sparky I am going to miss most of all.