My recollections of Kenkichi Iwasawa

Ehud de Shalit

I arrived in Princeton as a young graduate student in the year 1980/81. Iwasawa had been on the faculty there since 1967, the year in which he moved to Princeton from MIT. He was to stay in Princeton for seven more years. In 1986 he retired, and a year later he and his wife moved back to Tokyo, but I think that they were contemplating this move already in 1981.

Princeton's Fine hall, in sharp contrast to the Science Center at Harvard, for example, is built vertically. This meant that social contact between new graduate students and the professors was often limited to tea and coincidental meetings in the elevators, unless you were an avid player of Go, or were babysitting for the children of Thurston. My lack of confidence and Iwasawa's shyness did not make it easier for me to get to know him in my first year. So, although I have been attending a wonderful class of his on Function Field Arithmetic, my first acquaintance with Iwasawa Theory was through Eduardo Friedman. Eduardo was a year ahead of me, the last student of Iwasawa (if I am not mistaken). In 1981, in his second year, he had already obtained the main results of his PhD, which were published a year later in Inventiones, an unusual accomplishment even for a bright student at Princeton. In addition, Eduardo had an outgoing personality, was friendly with the Iwasawas, and when he saw that I was interested in number theory, volunteered to give a series of introductory talks on Iwasawa theory. He lectured to me and to Toby Orloff, a student of Shimura, and I immediately fell in love with the subject. I remember being struck by how the very simple, but ingenious idea of considering class groups in a $\mathbb{Z}_p$-tower, lead to an asymptotic formula for the p-class number. I did not know enough about Tate modules of Jacobians, nor was I able to appreciate the Main Conjecture, or understand the work of Mazur and Wiles which had just been announced. But the little Eduardo had taught me convinced me that this was the direction I wanted to take,