Call Me Mete: A Remembrance

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It borders on the unfair to be required to summarize a friendship of more than a one-half century in a verbal account supplemented by a few images that should last no more than fifteen minutes. How does one even begin to draw its outline for an audience with different degrees of acquaintance with the subject person? No catchy, pithy word exists to apply to Mete A. Sözen that would sum him up neatly so that I can walk away from the podium with the satisfaction of having done a good job. Was he a Reductionist who could unravel the inner working of a concept so that you could not escape grasping it? Was he an Iconoclast who was not bound in any way by the accepted conventional wisdom, but sought to unravel it so that it might be replaced by an improved account? How did he insist on implementing the Scientific Method or choosing death instead? Do even the simplest structural engineering theories need to be confirmed by Rigorous Observation or be discarded? Is Erudition, written or spoken, essential at all times? Can one dodge the Art of Teaching in the interest of research? Did one, out of courtesy, need to Suffer Fools or the supercilious class of individuals? Was there any goal that had Insurmountable Odds stacked against it so that it could be replaced by achievable objectives? Was Shocking People the best way to elicit responses from them? Mete would indulge in his unique way with all of these deeper concepts according to his understanding of life.

Today, a year after his passing Mete is remembered by people whose lives he touched in one way or another because he embodied the clever epitaphs that adorne his written and spoken legacy. He could show that there was always another way you could express a concept, consider a problem or work towards a solution. What will stand the test of time longest is, I think, his intuitive grasp that what drove seismic response was the drift demand embodied in the input motion for the structural system that it affected. That he was able to see that truth through the maze of test results obtained from the University of Illinois earthquake “simulator” is a remarkable feat of genius. With that one change of course earthquake structural engineering abadoned the established notion of force, a fool’s errand if ever there was one, and elevated the drift to its rightful, elevated position. That is not trend setting, it is knocking down the the walls of the maze to remove all confusingly inadequate notions.

For nearly sixty years Mete managed to simplify doggedly persistent problems to forms that could be handled by engineers in ways they could understand. The equivalent frame approach to slab design is still a part of everyday practice in an age when finite element solutions might be conceived as being the only correct goal to work for. The substitute damping method, complemented by the substitute frame extension are still accurate tools to derive drift demands in frames. His cautionary advice against placing much emphasis on strain as measure for performance must be remembered by us all because strain is a fickle, local variable that can be pulled in any direction by any assumption. He had run enough experiments in the lab to know that for a fact.

Yes, simple is elegant and easy but it takes genius to uncover it. Mete, mentor to many, had it.