Jean Ichbiah and his contributions[1]

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I learned with great sadness that Jean Ichbiah, who played such an important role in the history of European informatics, passed away on January 26th, 2007, from a brain tumor. In addition to the initial shock one feels terrible in such cases about conversations interrupted, visits postponed, admiration too weakly expressed. At least I can try to convey what made him such an exceptional computer scientist and entrepreneur.

Ichbiah's main appearance under the limelight was his astounding success in convincing the US Department of Defense to adopt his proposal, later to become Ada, as the winner of the DoD competition for the design of the programming language of the future. The choice of a French company (CII-HB), under the thin disguise of its American parent (Honeywell), was testimony to the impartiality of the process, but even more to the quality of the groundwork that Ichbiah's team had been quietly accumulating for years before, starting with one of the first implementations of Simula 67 and continuing with such carefully crafted systems programming languages as LIS. Not content with seeing his ideas triumph, Ichbiah devoted himself in the following years, with his characteristic passion and single-mindedness, to making Ada succeed technically and commercially. When the fortunes of Alsys, the company he had created, hinged on the difficulties of the newly created American subsidiary (a challenge that has threatened many a European company trying to expand a local success into an international business), he did not hesitate to move to the US himself and take the helm. As he later liked to explain, selling a programming language turned out to be too much of a challenge, and he disagreed anyway with the later evolution of Ada, which he felt betrayed his ideals of elegance and consistency. But soon Ichbiah was busy with another project, Fitaly, in a new company, Textware. Fitaly introduced a revolutionary way to enter text for specialized application domains, faster than anything known before, and has been a great commercial success.

A remarkable characteristic of the project is that is started out as a one-man programming effort. After the Ada and Alsys episodes, Ichbiah could have rested on his laurels -- Legion of Honor, Academy of Sciences etc. -- but decided instead to take on a new challenge. A fine observer of the industry scene, he came to the conclusion that something fundamental had changed thanks to the concomitant progress of hardware, software development environments and component-based development. In the early days of computing, as he saw it, programming was often an individual activity. Then in the sixties and seventies the development of sophisticated systems had increasingly required big groups and big companies. Suddenly, components and modern IDEs made it possible again for an individual with a clever idea to write a program that would make a difference -- and, in Ichbiah's case, found a successful business. So from his house near Boston he started again from the ground up, as a mere programmer, and built the basis of Fitayy, which quickly grew into a full-fledged company.

Like Gilles Kahn, who also went away far too young, Jean Ichbiah was a member of the first generation of European computer scientists -- those who did not come to computer science after something else (usually mathematics and physics) but devoted their career to this new discipline right from the start, usually after a stay at a place like Stanford which hosted successive waves of students from Polytechnique and sent them back to key positions in European computer science. A small but typical example of this vision is an interview technique that Icchbiah was using as early as the late seventies: asking job candidates what books had influenced them most. He held that true computer scientists are shaped by the seminal books they read, whether Knuth or Aho or Dijkstra, and that the people he would consider hiring were those who could talk convincingly about their personal relation to such books.

On the personal side Jean was a sometimes impetuous but always warm colleague, with an extended network of friends around the world. He was proud of his Sephardi origins and his knowledge of the Ladino language, this Castilian dialect, now fading out, of Jews of the Mediterranean lands, with their special attachment to France so vividly evoked in the novels of Albert Cohen.

Jean Ichbiah will remain one of the key figures of European computer science; he showed the absolute best of its potential to contribute to both technology and business.