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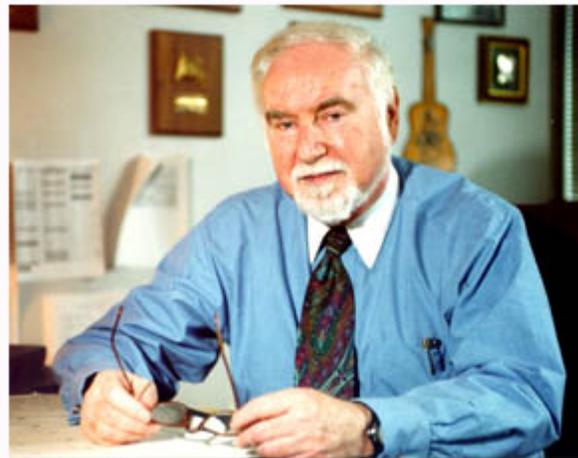
Mario Loiederman

Brothers Come Together

By Roberto Loiederman

The truth is, until the last few years, my brother Mario and I weren't that close. I used to think of him as, well, an engineer. Once, when I visited him many years ago, I noticed he subscribed to a publication called *Reinforced Concrete Monthly*. When I would mention this to my hip, artistic friends, it was always good for a laugh.

Mario and I were so different. He was tall, blond, blue-eyed; I'm medium height and dark. He was the good son who got his engineering degree from Johns Hopkins University at 20, married at 21, and had children soon after. He started his own company and always lived reasonably close to our parents and took care of them. I was the rebel who traveled for many years, working as a merchant seaman and writer, and I didn't settle down until my mid-30s. Mario was a Type A personality, and I'm a ... what's the laid-back type called?



Courtesy Roberto Loiederman

When I was six and Mario 12, we boarded a tramp steamer with our parents and emigrated from Argentina. During the 30-day trip, Mario spent much of his time making sure I didn't get in trouble. I would disappear, and he would look for me. Inevitably, he would find me in the crew mess, hanging out with the Norwegian seamen, drinking condensed milk flavored with burned coffee. The ship stopped for a few days in the Brazilian port of Recife. I ran down the gangway ahead of everyone, and Mario came after me, grabbing my hand as we walked gingerly on top of the rotten bananas strewn everywhere on the dock.

During the years we grew up in Baltimore, he was always like that -- a third parent, never really a brother. Then I moved far away, and we never had a chance to be real brothers. Not until six years ago. That's when we finally connected. My wife and two sons and I went to Israel for a couple weeks, and Mario joined us. In spite of his chronic heart condition, he went around with

us and did everything. Night after night, after everyone else was asleep, Mario and I would talk until three or four in the morning. He was proud that in recent years he had become more and more rebellious.

He said he spent time with those he liked and cut out those he didn't. He now did things because he wanted to, not just because they were expected of him. Mario talked a lot about music, poetry, painting. No, he wasn't a secret artist, but he admired those who were driven to create. As chairman of the Maryland State Arts Council, he spent his spare time raising money so artistic people would have venues for displaying their talent. This had become his great passion.

I realized he was trying to tell me something: over the years, the differences between us had melted away. He was right. While he had become less conventional, I had become more so. We had converged. Oddly, one night we were standing in front of a full-length mirror at a plush hotel at the Dead Sea, and we realized that as we had grown older, we had even begun to look alike. We were finally brothers.

Although Mario spoke a lot about art and artists while we were in Israel, the engineer in him always lurked close to the surface. A civil engineer, he headed Loiederman Soltesz Associates, a Maryland firm that handled all sorts of civil engineering projects, including shopping malls. But Mario's specialty had become the development of wetlands. One day we walked by a stream, and Mario noticed a tomato plant near the water. He wasn't happy about it. "Tomato seeds go through the digestive system and come out the same way they go in," he said. "A tomato plant means that sewage has gotten into the stream." Mario contacted Israeli authorities to let them know.

Mario died suddenly in his sleep from the effects of his heart condition in December, 2001 at the age of 66. He had undergone a multiple bypass some 20 years earlier, and he had recently been treated for arrhythmia. Now that he's gone, I think about the conversations we had about art, and I also think about his reaction to that tomato plant. And I wish I had told him this: There's no doubt that art is important. It gives civilization its heart and soul. But in India they make as many movies as in the United States. In Latin America, they have as many good poets. In Africa, they produce a wealth of visual art. Many more concert performers come out of Asia than the United States. What separates us from those places is not our art. It's our public works, our drinking water and sewage systems, the solidity of our buildings and bridges, our good roads. And, yes, our reinforced concrete. What makes our lives healthy and comfortable is the engineering that you, Mario, devoted your working life to. Our society functions as it does because of some engineer who looks at a wild tomato plant and sees a threat to the community's welfare. If I could talk to you one more time, I'd say: thanks, Mario. Thanks for moving civilization forward. Thanks for being an engineer.

Roberto Loiederman is a freelance writer in Van Nuys, California. This first appeared in the Baltimore Sun newspaper.