

R.I.P. — S.P.Q.R**Sebastian Patrick Quintus Rahtz
(13.2.1955–15.3.2016)**

Frank Mittelbach and Joan Richmond
(translator)*

There are a small number of people in the worldwide \TeX community whose activities in the nineties have been instrumental in shaping the \TeX world as we know it today. Sebastian Rahtz, known also by the abbreviation SPQR, was without any doubt one of this group.

Sebastian was born as the fifth child (Quintus) of a family of archaeologists, which shaped the whole of his future life. He began his career with an M.A. in archaeology and as late as 2009 he was still describing the Protestant graveyard in Rome as the place in which he most enjoyed being [5].



Sebastian, colorful as always in one of his striking outfits — 2005

Already during his early time as a university lecturer in Humanities Computing at Southampton University, he became involved with typesetting classical texts, such as “The Lexicon of Greek Personal Names” (LGPN), and at some point he came in contact with \TeX , which then became the centre of his work for almost two decades.

After Southampton, he worked for some time as a freelance consultant at several places, including CERN, where he worked with Michel Goossens. After that he took a post with Elsevier, where he was principally involved

with \TeX and its use in scientific publishing. Roughly at the turn of the millennium he moved over to become Information Manager at the Oxford University Computing Services (OUCS), and in the following years undertook various positions in higher management there.

Sebastian was a pragmatist, who did things when they had to be done, so it is not surprising that a number of things which were significant for the spread and further development of \TeX and \LaTeX can be traced back to him. A great deal of this was

* Mrs. Richmond kindly agreed to translate the German text that originally appeared in *TeXnische Komödie*, the journal of the German \TeX user group, DANTE e.V. [4]. She is the author of the book “Nine letters from an artist: the families of William Gillard”.

confined to “behind the scenes” operations, as community service, and consequently is not necessarily known by the substantial majority of today’s \TeX users, but all these activities were hugely important at the time and exercised a decisive influence on the way \TeX is presented to its users today.

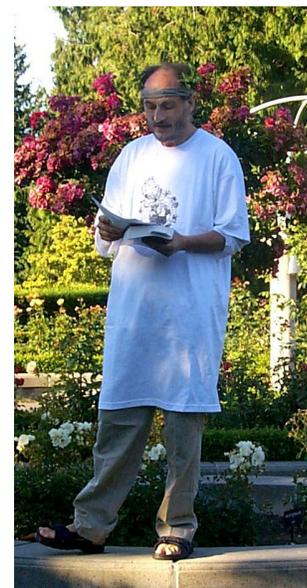
In the eighties crucially important aspects were the further spread of \TeX , the porting of the programs to new operating systems, the development of printer drivers for new devices and the like. Distributions existed as “tapes” for individual operating systems and Sebastian began his \TeX life as a coordinator and distributor of tapes for SunOS.

His engagement in the maintenance and expansion of the Aston \TeX archive (working with Peter Abbott and others) was a logical next step, from which CTAN (the Comprehensive \TeX Archive Network) was subsequently born, so that Sebastian is effectively one of the founding fathers of CTAN as we know it today.

In those days, an Internet connection for most \TeX users was either rudimentary (a 300kbps modem was usual) or not available at all, so that the distribution of \TeX software via floppy discs, CDs and later DVDs became of decisive importance with the rise of distributions for Atari, PC, Amiga and other computer systems. Anyone who still owns a \TeX Live disc from that period can verify that Sebastian’s name appears as editor. He was the one who constructed the first \TeX Live installation (based on the Unix distribution of Thomas Esser), and over the next few years, together with a few other volunteers, he continually improved it. The first seven or eight \TeX Live productions carry his name as the responsible editor into the year 2004.

As I see it, both CTAN and \TeX Live are vitally important milestones in the history of \TeX , without which we would perhaps no longer know and use \TeX and \LaTeX today, since they were absolutely decisive for wider distribution of the software.

But Sebastian’s name is also linked to several macro packages which are still important today, despite the fact that he played down the importance of this work in an interview with Dave Walden [5]: these



Sebastian at the “Poetry Contest” — Vancouver 1999

include the early versions of `graphics`, produced with David Carlisle, and the monumental package `hyperref` which subsequently saw further development by Heiko Oberdiek.

In the new millennium Sebastian turned his attention to new tasks outside the world of `TEX`, among which are his activities on TEI (Text Coding Initiative) and OSS Watch. It is fair to say that the XML world fascinated and absorbed him in the same way that the `TEX` world had done decades before.

Sebastian was in many respects a model for us to imitate. He never left construction sites behind him (such as one encounters all too often in the world of `TEX` and elsewhere), but always left behind him work that was ordered and finished, and—when he no longer had enough energy or interest in something—he never clung to it but happily handed it on in good time and in good condition to a successor.

I no longer recall exactly when I got to know Sebastian personally, but it must have been sometime at the beginning of the nineties. In the course of the following years we attacked various projects together. The most important of these are the NFSS (New Font Selection Scheme for `LATEX`), in which he undertook the integration of the 35 standard PostScript fonts and later the book projects *The `LATEX` Graphics Companion* [1, 2] and *The `LATEX` Web Companion* [3].

Ever since then I have valued him as both colleague and friend, and there are a number of activities which I would like to remember. To

start with, the nightly coding sessions (via e-mail), during which I once asked him how he could combine that with the care of his little daughter. To which he replied that she kept him awake, lay on his lap and helped him. Whereupon he sent me a picture of Matilde (6 months old) and himself “working together”. Or a walk on a free day during a conference, during which he dragged me forcibly into a book shop, ran straight to the children’s section, hunted out a book that was completely unknown to me, and said “Buy”. It looked rather odd, with the picture of a boy wearing glasses, but I followed his advice, bought it, and began to read it that same evening.



Sebastian “preaching” about XML and Passive `TEX`, with a t-shirt from San Francisco (1997); in our hearts we are all traditionalists, I still own this too—Oxford 2000

By four o’clock the following morning I had finished it, and would rather not want to know how my lecture went that morning. The book was by a still fairly unknown woman writer at that time, and was called “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone”.

Sebastian was a “philosopher in his own right”, with a lovable, dry English sense of humor, which often delighted me. This spring, his journey ended due to cancer. My thoughts are with him and his family.

Rest In Peace, S.P.Q.R.

References

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- [5] David Walden. Interview with Sebastian Rahtz, 2009. <https://tug.org/interviews/rahtz.html>.



Sebastian among his family: Inês, Leonor and Matilde—2014