

The occasion of Paul Erdős' seventieth birthday provides a welcome opportunity to pay tribute to this remarkable mathematician. In an age when specialization is the order of the day he continues to work in a wide variety of areas fertilizing them by giving lectures under the by now wellknown title "Problems and results on..."

For nearly fifty years it has been my privilege to watch his progress from close quarters. In the physical sense this has not always been very easy on account of his peripatetic life style. One of his friends once met him in the street completely unexpectedly and exclaimed: "Paul, are you here or are you somewhere else?"

The mathematical world is indebted to Paul Erdős for an unending stream of stimulating papers. As soon as he has dealt with one class of problems he immediately passes to significant analogues or generalizations so that the living surface of his work is constantly expanding. A suggestion thrown out lightly by him in the course of an after-dinner conversation might easily grow into a joint paper.

It is idle to claim that if Paul Erdős did not exist he would have to be invented. No one has so powerful or so bizarre an imagination. Hungary has been the cradle of a long line of truly great mathematicians. I am tempted to place Paul Erdős in this great tradition as its brightest ornament, and yet this would not be altogether appropriate. Paul does not really fall into any pattern; he defies categorization and, like Mozart, has to be taken entirely on his own terms and recognized as wholly *sui generis*. Although I have known him for so long I am no nearer to understanding the enigma than I was in 1934.

Paul Erdős is the author or part-author of something like 1000 papers. He has collaborated with literally hundreds of mathematicians, and wherever he pays a visit he leaves behind him a visible paper trail: *ex ungue leonem*. On whatever object he casts his looks theorems spring up like mushrooms.

His mode of life and work is legendary. Chains, whether of gold or of silk, he has always rejected and his loyalty has never been to any one institution but rather to mathematical truth. His constant travelling has enabled him to maintain steady contact with a maximum number of fellow mathematicians and always to keep up with the stop press news of the most recent findings.

He was not yet twenty when the great Schur lectured in Berlin on Paul's new proof of Bertrand's postulate. Indeed, number theory was his earliest love and has

remained a faithful, if not a sole, companion. He is equally at home and active in many areas of analysis, of set theory, probability and, above all, of every aspect of combinatorics: graph theory, extremal problems, Ramsey theory, and partition calculus. He has unveiled hidden connections between mathematical ideas never before vouchsafed to mortals.

Paul remains the intellectual athlete we have always known. In spite of his having reached the psalmist's limit of seventy one observes no diminution of his mental vigour, of enthusiasm and single-mindedness, of inventiveness and penetration, of encyclopaedic and minute knowledge of mathematical literature.

This volume is presented by its authors to Paul Erdős to mark his seventieth birthday and to wish him many more years of fruitful creativity.

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