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Abe Shenitzer at 75

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Widely recognized as a tireless crusader for "humanistic" approaches to mathematics, Abe Shenitzer earlier this year completed the third quarter of his first century. To mark the birthday, a celebratory conference in Abe's honor was held on October 5th at York University in Toronto, his home institution since 1969.

Abe was born in Warsaw but grew up in Sosnowiec, an industrial city in southwestern Poland. He says that in his school days he liked mathematics and was good at it but did not yet sense its cultural significance. He inclined at that time to prefer the study of languages, which indeed has remained one of his great loves. A deep sensitivity for linguistic nuance lies behind the success of his many translations of mathematical (and other) books and articles from Russian, German and Polish. (This activity he continues to pursue; his next major project is a translation of Detlef Laugwitz's recent intellectual biography of Riemann.)

Between 1943 and his liberation from Bergen-Belsen at the end of World War II Abe was in several labor and concentration camps. He continues to share his thoughts on the Holocaust by invitation with many groups, especially of high-school students. He came to the United States in 1946. He had by this time taught himself English, using the famous Langenscheidt method that based the study on a literary masterpiece (in this case *A Christmas Carol*). He took an undergraduate degree in mathematics at Brooklyn College, then went on to earn his Ph.D. at New York University. His supervisor was the late Wilhelm Magnus, whom Abe remembers as "a man of towering intellect and wonderful kindness." It was while at NYU that he met the wise and gracious lady who became his wife; he and Sarah now have two grown daughters and two grandsons.

A brief stint at a Bell Telephone research laboratory convinced him that his future lay in academia. He taught at Rutgers University in New Jersey for a year and a half, then at Adelphi University on Long Island until his move to Toronto. His classroom career was crowned by his winning of a prestigious Ontario-wide award for teaching excellence; the testimonials cited not only his command of his subject and his communicative skills but also his concern for his students as people. He retired officially from York University a few years ago, but now is busier than ever with scholarly pursuits. He has of course many interests and passions outside mathematics. Two of his recent translations from Polish are of books about literature. He is among other things a lover of good music (with a special reverence for Bach), an enthusiastic skier, and a skilled craftsman in wood.

The conference marking Abe's 75th birthday was superbly organized by two of his York colleagues and longtime friends, Israel Kleiner and Martin Muldoon. Five speakers graced the program, and the diversity of their themes mirrored the breadth of the guest of honor's mathematical interests. Ed Barbeau (University of Toronto) spoke on "Fourier Series"; Harold Edwards (New York University) on "The Fundamental Theorem of Algebra"; Peter Hilton (University of Central Florida and SUNY at Binghampton) on "From Geometry to Algebra: Reflections on the Birth of Homological Algebra"; Walter Littman (University of Minnesota) on "The Two-Way Street Between Control Theory and Partial Differential Equations"; and Helena Pycior (University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee) on "George Berkeley, Mathematics and Philosophy: Berkeleian Scholarship into the 1990s." Tributes to Abe at the ensuing banquet were glowing, but luckily his sense of humor and his sense of perspective, both of which are quite out of the ordinary, should ensure that he will be able to go on wearing the same hats as before.

Abe Shenitzer's work consistently champions what he calls the intellectual aspects of mathematics as opposed to the merely technical. His many talks and articles strive always to close the gap between these two facets of the subject. Specialization, he has written, "is

the price we pay for creative achievements", but it entails that "the 'average' productive mathematician sometimes knows little about mathematical ideas outside his speciality and even less about their evolution and role." He once contrasted this narrowness of vision among mathematicians with the situation in a discipline such as English literature. "The term 'English major,'" he wrote, "implies some historical, philosophical and evaluative training and competence. It is sad but true that the term 'mathematician' does not imply corresponding training and competence."

These concerns underlie Abe's approach to the column, called "The Evolution of ...," which he has edited for the *American Mathematical Monthly* since January 1994. The column's articles are chosen for their ability to expand readers' mathematical horizons by paying special attention to (as Abe puts it) "ideas and issues that overlap different domains of mathematics, or overlap mathematics and other disciplines, such as physics, philosophy and so on." The articles have solid mathematical substance, with an emphasis on developments since 1700; but always the goal is to shed light on larger themes. This policy should make the column especially valuable to teachers, whose effectiveness can be much increased by awareness of their curriculum's wider mathematical and cultural context.

It is difficult for me to write dispassionately about Abe Shenitzer—so I hope that it is not necessary. For more than a quarter of a century he has figured in my life as colleague, collaborator, guru, travelling companion and much more; ours is a friendship with many dimensions. I can echo the several people at the conference in his honor who said, privately or publicly, that they count Abe among their greatest teachers though they never sat in one of his classrooms. I owe him debts that are not easy to express, let alone to repay—and I know that many others would say the same. It is a joy to report that at 75 he enjoys a mental and physical robustness scarcely if at all diminished by time. That is a lucky state of affairs for the cause of humanistic mathematics, which Abe has served so devotedly and so well.

A Brief Tribute to π

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