

Oberwolfach Celebrates Its Sixtieth Anniversary

On the intermittently sunny and rainy afternoon of July 2, 2004, before an audience of about seventy people, Mozart's quintet for clarinet, two violins, viola, and cello (K. 581) floated through the lecture room of the Mathematisches Forschungs-

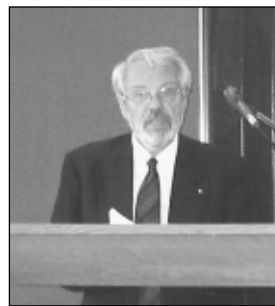


Musicians at Oberwolfach celebration, left to right: Wolfgang Soergerl (violin, with back to camera), Volker Puppe (violin), A. Conrad (viola), and D. Müllner (clarinet).

stitut Oberwolfach. The tune, at once celestial and bucolic, seemed to capture the spirit of this institute nestled in the Black Forest of Germany and to provide a fitting opening for its sixtieth anniversary celebration. The musicians knew well what they were celebrating: four out of the quintet are mathematicians, and one of them, Matthias Kreck of the Universität Heidelberg, is a former director of Oberwolfach. It was a warm and festive occasion, but not entirely lighthearted, as many at the event discussed the serious business of Oberwolfach's recent decision to change the basis on which it has been funded for its sixty years of existence.

Founded in 1944 in the final days of World War II, the institute was originally intended to

support the Nazi war effort, but it never played such a role. In fact, in the years immediately following the war, Oberwolfach became a place where German mathematicians and colleagues from other countries could reestablish ties broken during the war. Since then, the institute's rise as one of the world's major meeting points for mathe-



Martin Barner, above, and Günther Wildenhain, below.

matics has made the tiny, placid, Black Forest village of Oberwolfach a household word among mathematicians. Within Germany, Oberwolfach plays a critical role in providing many young German mathematicians with their first taste of international collaboration.

A large part of the success of Oberwolfach can be attributed to the vision of Martin Barner, who served as director from 1963 to 1994 and built the institute into a world center for mathematics. Barner also kept up the Oberwolfach tradition of reaching across national barriers: one of the speakers during the celebration, Günther Wildenhain of the

Universität Rostock, president of the Deutsche Mathematiker Vereinigung (German Mathematical Society), noted that in the years of the “iron curtain” Barner made efforts to bring mathematicians from East Germany to Oberwolfach. Now eighty-three years old and retired, Barner attended the anniversary celebration. His successor, Matthias Kreck, who played the cello in the quintet, served as di-



David Eisenbud, left, and Manuel Castellet, right.

rector from 1994 until 2002, when the current director, Gert-Martin Greuel of the Universität Kaiserslautern, took up the reins.

The basic idea of Oberwolfach is simple: to hold meetings in a wide range of mathematical areas in a peaceful setting with minimal distractions. Each year the institute holds about fifty week-long meetings that attract a total of around twenty-five hundred mathematicians. There are also activities for smaller groups, such as “Research in Pairs” and the longstanding *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (work team), in which nonexperts work together to become familiar with a particular mathematical topic. Once a year Oberwolfach hosts a small program for mathematics teachers, but otherwise it trains its sights exclusively on fostering mathematical research.

Among the speakers at the anniversary celebration were three other directors of mathematics institutes: Jean-Pierre Bourguignon of the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques outside Paris, AMS president David Eisenbud of the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute in Berkeley, and Manuel Castellet of the Centre de Recerca Matemàtica in Barcelona. As the main speaker at the anniversary event, Bourguignon presented a lecture, in German, about some of the highlights of Oberwolfach’s history and its place among institutes in the world. He delivered greetings from Henri Cartan, who celebrated his one-hundredth birthday one week after the Oberwolfach anniversary. Cartan, who first visited Oberwolfach in 1946, did a great deal to rebuild links between French and German

mathematicians after the war. Castellet spoke on behalf of the European Mathematical Society (EMS) and read a message from the EMS president, Sir John Kingman, who noted the role that Oberwolfach plays as “a symbol of European mathematics and a potent force for the development of mathematical research.”

Among the other speakers at the anniversary celebration were representatives of funders of Oberwolfach, including the state of Baden-Württemberg, which provides most of the money, and the Volkswagen Foundation, which paid for the construction of the Oberwolfach buildings in the 1960s and 1970s and has been an important source of funding ever since. Heinz Gumin, director of the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, spoke on behalf of this foundation, which has supported the Oberwolfach library, as well as on behalf of the Oberwolfach Stiftung, which is building an endowment specifically to support the institute. The Oberwolfach Stiftung provides the 5,000-euro (about US \$6,000) award for the Oberwolfach Prize, which was presented during the celebration to Paul Biràn of Tel Aviv University. In a brief lecture, Mina Teicher of Bar-Ilan University described some of Biràn’s work, which is in symplectic geometry, particularly symplectic packing and decomposition



Oberwolfach Prize winner Paul Biràn.



Left to right: Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, Heinz Gumin, Paul Biràn, Mina Teicher, and Gert-Martin Greuel.

of symplectic manifolds. Teicher mentioned that, just a few days before, Biràn had also received an EMS Prize at the European Congress of Mathematicians.

Amid the celebratory music, the congratulations, and the laudatory words about the success

of Oberwolfach, a more equivocal note was struck concerning its long-term funding. Oberwolfach had recently finalized negotiations to enter the Leibniz Gemeinschaft, also known as the “blue list” of institutes in Germany. The Leibniz Gemeinschaft is an association of approximately eighty non-university-based institutes that receive funding from the federal government and from the states in which the institutes are located. Apart from Oberwolfach, there is only one other mathematics institute in the Leibniz Gemeinschaft, the Weierstrass Institute for Applied Analysis and Stochastics in Berlin, which is quite different from Oberwolfach. In fact, Oberwolfach does not really resemble any of the Leibniz institutes, most of



Guests enjoying dinner at the anniversary celebration. On the left is Friedrich Hirzebruch.

which have permanent research staffs and are much larger.

Since its founding, Oberwolfach has received most of its funding from its home state of Baden-Württemberg. The institute is run not by the state but by a private organization of mathematicians called the Gesellschaft für Mathematische Forschung (Society for Mathematical Research). The state funds have never dried up, but nei-

ther have they been secure from year to year. Baden-Württemberg funds Oberwolfach out of a sense of tradition; the state has no law stipulating that these funds must be paid nor does it have an established funding program to which the institute applies for support. States in Germany have been under increasing financial strain for some years now, so it could be risky to continue to rely on Baden-Württemberg’s sense of obligation toward the institute.

The advantage of becoming a Leibniz institute is that doing so would provide Oberwolfach with a more stable funding base. The disadvantage is that Oberwolfach may have to give up some of the autonomy and freedom it now enjoys as a private institute in order to adhere to the rules of the Leibniz Gemeinschaft. Entering the Leibniz Gemeinschaft entails more bureaucracy, of which Oberwolfach has already gotten a taste. Not knowing quite how Oberwolfach would fit in, the Leibniz Gemeinschaft initially wanted to categorize it as a “service institute”. The Leibniz service institutes are typically libraries or other archives, or facilities that provide access to specimens or instrumentation for research. According to Greuel, it took some doing to convince the Leibniz Gemeinschaft that

Oberwolfach is not a service institute, because research is actually conducted at Oberwolfach. In the end this point was resolved, and Oberwolfach will enter the Leibniz Gemeinschaft next year, with funding to start in 2006. Greuel was optimistic that the change would improve the stability of Oberwolfach’s funding but noted that vigilance would be needed to ensure that the institute preserves its unique character.

In his remarks during the celebration, Gumin pointed to a bright spot in Oberwolfach’s finances: since its founding in 1997, the Oberwolfach Stiftung has raised 1 million euros (about US\$1.2 million) for its endowment, called the Horst Tietz Fund. This is no small feat, as Germany has not developed the tradition of individual charitable donations that one finds, for example, in the United States, where such donations bring greater tax breaks. In addition to individual contributions, the endowment also received donations from the insurance company Allianz and the publisher Springer-Verlag. In addition, the U.S.-based Preuss Foundation provides one-to-one matching of individual contributions to the endowment. The Preuss Foundation was established by Peter Preuss, a German mathematician who founded a profitable software company in the United States. The Oberwolfach Förderverein (Friends of Oberwolfach) also raises money for the institute through annual membership dues from its approximately 650 members.

The anniversary celebration was an occasion for many of the attendees to look back on what Oberwolfach meant to them personally. In his remarks during the celebration, Eisenbud remembered that he first came to Oberwolfach in 1971 as a fresh Ph.D. He encountered leaders in the field whom he had heard of but never met and established ties with people who later became close colleagues and collaborators. Since then he has returned to Oberwolfach about once a year and now considers himself an “old-timer”. Behind the calm appearance of Oberwolfach run the strong dynamics of mathematical research, he noted, and the simplicity and serenity of the place gives mathematicians the security they need to pursue their passion. One time when he arrived for a visit at Oberwolfach, a colleague greeted him with the words, “Welcome to heaven.” As Eisenbud put it, “This is a feeling many mathematicians share of this charmed place.”

—Allyn Jackson