

## About the Cover

### In 1934 Lipman Bers Escaped from Riga to Prague

This month's cover accompanies the short excerpt in this issue from the memoir written by Lipman Bers about his stay in Prague 1934–1938. Those were difficult times. Czechoslovakia alone among the countries of Europe had a reputation for welcoming exiles. When Chamberlain and the French gave away the country they gave away more than the Czechs alone. In the memoir Bers refers to the “famous” pink passport issued to foreigners seeking asylum, and it is his own that is shown on the cover, along with his matriculation certificate at the University of Prague. What other mathematicians passed through with one of these passports?

“Religion: konfessionslos”, but “Nationalität: Jude” might seem a bit strange nowadays, but even up until not too long ago it seems to have been a feature of documentation in post-war Eastern Europe.

Included here is an additional short excerpt from Bers' memoir, sent by his son Victor Bers, a professor in the Classics Department of Yale University. It has little to do with mathematics, true, but seems to capture well some of the flavor of those long dead days. It helps to know at the beginning that Lipman was carrying his stepfather's passport instead of his own.

*The night before my departure was the first time in my life that I had trouble falling asleep. (For many years after, I couldn't fall asleep if I had to go to another town the next day.) I was ordered the next morning to take my small suitcase and board a truck with the company name “W. Weinberg”, and get out soon after leaving the town, where a car would pick me up. When the car came, I recognized the driver, an anti-Nazi refugee, who made his living by smuggling. He was to bring me to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. We avoided the bigger hamlets, and went instead from village to village. The trip lasted eight hours. This was my first car trip except for very short taxi voyages from Riga to the beach. When we were approaching the state boundary separating Latvia from Estonia, my guide reminded me that the internal Latvian passport that I carried was in someone else's name. Once he said this, the whole situation became very unpleasant, and I said only that we would decide how to act at the very last moment.*

*Actually, everything went very smoothly. The border was guarded by just one soldier, who seemed interested exclusively in the large bottle of vodka which we gave him. Once we realized that, we acted almost automatically. The soldier accepted the passport without looking at the photograph, and put a Latvian stamp in it. In a few minutes we were in Estonia. The driver then gave me back my Latvian internal passport (the one that was actually in my name), and promised to see to it that the false passport would be put back in the legitimate owner's hands as soon as possible. Then the smuggler asked for a rather large sum of money for having driven me across the border. This surprised me because my father had told me that he had already paid the man to do so. But as a young man abroad, under rather complicated circumstances, there was little I could do, and I gave him the money.*

We wish to thank Victor Bers and his sister Ruth Shapiro for extraordinary effort in helping us put together the material on Lipman.

—Bill Casselman, Graphics Editor  
([notices-covers@ams.org](mailto:notices-covers@ams.org))