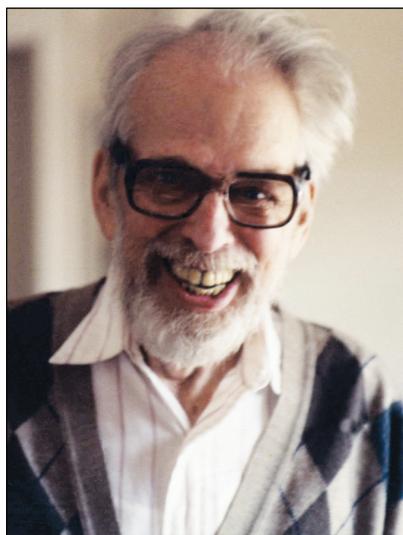


Bers Library Finds a Home— and Resonance—at Charles University

Allyn Jackson



Photograph courtesy of Victor Bers.

Lipman Bers, 1991.

professor of classics at Yale University—in other words, he is someone who lives and works through books. His sister, Ruth, is a retired professor of psychology at the City University of New York and a psychoanalyst, and she too felt that their father's mathematics books should not simply be discarded or sold off.

As they cast about for an idea of what to do, Ruth's husband, Bob Shapiro, decided to call the AMS for advice. Ruth and her brother knew of the AMS because their father had served as president of the Society from 1975 to 1977 and had been active in AMS affairs while they were growing up. But they did not know that the AMS has a book donation program and that many of the donated books have gone to Charles University in Prague, where the mathematics library was almost wiped out in the floods that devastated central Europe in 2002. "I'm not sure whether the person Bob spoke to realized that my father had his doctoral degree

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Lipman Bers died in 1993 after a long battle with Parkinson's disease. Not long after his death, his son and daughter, Victor Bers and Ruth Shapiro, had to start caring for their mother, so their father's study in the family home in New Rochelle, New York, remained basically in the state in which he had left it. When their mother passed away in early 2006, Ruth and Victor finally had to deal with the contents of their father's study. Victor is a

from Charles," said Victor. "It was the single most appropriate place on earth for the books to go."

When word came that the forty cartons had arrived in Prague in early 2007, "We couldn't have been happier," said Ruth. "We were overjoyed to be able to replace some of the books they had lost." With books in four languages that Lipman Bers knew well—English, French, German, and Russian—the collection symbolizes the life of a man who was deeply affected by the cataclysmic events of the early twentieth century but who remained true to his authentic calling in teaching, learning, and doing mathematics.

Mathematician, Teacher, Activist

By any standard, Lipman Bers led an eventful life. Sometime in the late 1980s, the AMS bought him a laptop computer so that he could write his memoirs. He worked on them intermittently, and when his illness advanced he was assisted by Janet Shapiro, a former graduate student of (but no relation to) his daughter, Ruth. Because of his failing health, Bers was unable to write a full-fledged autobiography. The resulting document, which he called "pages" from an autobiography, is a charming, fascinating, and sometimes harrowing 80-page account of his early life up to 1942. The penultimate event recounted in the memoir has him, his wife, and the six-month-old Ruth fleeing to the United States in 1940, shortly after the start of the Nazi occupation of Paris. As Bers recounted in his memoir, their passports were stamped by the French police, "pack your suitcase and get out."

Lipman Bers was born in Riga (now in Latvia, then part of Russia) in 1914. Although his father was trained as a mining engineer and his mother later became a psychoanalyst, they both worked as principals at progressive Yiddish-language schools in Riga. One summer when he was sixteen or seventeen years old, Bers traveled with his mother to

Prague, where they came upon a bookstore with many mathematics books. He was dazzled, for mathematics books were hard to come by in Riga. A short one on set theory caught his eye. Bers wrote in his memoir: "I opened it to the first page. Not only could I understand everything that I read, but the subject seemed familiar." The book included an open problem, Cantor's Continuum Hypothesis, which "would give me immortality if I could solve it." After returning to Riga, Bers decided to apply to the University of Zurich to study mathematics.

He spent one year in Zurich and then returned to Riga, where he became active in anti-Fascist youth movements. After a putsch by the Latvian prime minister, the situation became quite dangerous, with antigovernment groups being rounded up and sent to internment camps. Bers continued to be involved in the resistance movement, in particular helping to circulate a newspaper that was critical of the government. One day he called home and his mother told him she was "busy with visitors" and could not talk, a signal that the police had come to arrest him. He went into hiding and shortly thereafter fled Latvia, first going to Scandinavia and Poland and eventually making his way to Prague. There he enrolled in Charles University, where he earned a doctorate in mathematics in 1938. He wrote his thesis, *Ueber das harmonische Mass im Raume*, under the direction of Karel Löwner (who took the name Charles Loewner after emigrating to the United States). Löwner had also received his doctorate from Charles University, in 1917. Some of Bers's recollections of Prague are recounted in the excerpt from his memoirs that appears in this issue of the *Notices*.

After reaching the United States, Bers had a difficult time finding work. His son, Victor, explained that there was some fear that the many refugee mathematicians coming over from Europe might take jobs away from Americans, and there was also some anti-Semitism. On the other hand, many mathematics departments recognized the opportunity this wave of refugees offered for hiring outstanding researchers. Bers discussed this period in a lecture, "European Mathematicians' Migration to America", which he gave at the AMS centennial celebration in August 1988. In the lecture he recounted that when he came to the United States, he was advised to change his first name to Leslie and to join the Unitarian church. He also thanked the many American colleagues who welcomed so many refugees like him.

By 1942 Bers had landed a position at Brown University. In his memoir he recalled discussing the position with Brown mathematician William Praeger. Trying to test Bers's knowledge, Praeger explained in a superficial way what photo-elasticity is and then asked Bers, "You know the foundations of photo-elasticity, don't you?" Bers wrote: "I was pleased to realize that he knew not too much



Photographs of the library by Jaroslav Richter.



Photos of damage to books at the Charles University mathematics library, inflicted in the 2002 floods. Top: Books on the ground floor, where water rose to about 190 cm. Bottom: Destroyed books thrown from windows onto Sokolovska Street.

more than I, and I answered, 'the very foundations, yes.' Then he offered me a job to teach and do research in this fashionable discipline... I will always be grateful to him for not taking photo-elasticity too seriously."

After teaching at Brown for a few years, Bers moved to Syracuse University and then spent

two years at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. In 1951 he went to the Courant Institute at New York University and in 1964 moved to Columbia University, where he remained until his retirement in 1984.

Bers made deep and substantial contributions to several areas of mathematics, including quasiconformal mappings, Teichmüller theory, and Kleinian groups. An overview of his mathematical work may be found in the obituary by William Abikoff, which appeared in the January 1995 issue of the *Notices*. Abikoff not only describes Bers's mathematics but also fondly recalls the influence Bers had on his students and colleagues. "In his power as a mathematician, his dignity, his enthusiasm, and his caring for others, he set a standard for the people who knew him," Abikoff wrote. Bers and his wife, Mary, created in their home a warm and welcoming atmosphere for visitors, which included not only students and mathematicians but also dissidents expelled from the Soviet Union. Bers was active in many human rights efforts, and that part of his life is described in the *Notices* obituary by Carol Corillon and Irwin Kra.

Devastation Hits a Great Library

The Charles University mathematics library, called the Václav Hlavatý Library, was the largest mathematics library in the Czech Republic up to 2002, when catastrophic floods hit central Europe. The building housing the library is in the Karlín district of Prague, which was severely affected by the flooding. The library was on the ground floor with depositories in the cellar. At first it appeared that the ground floor would remain above the flood waters, so everything in the depositories was brought up to the ground floor. However, the official predictions about how high the waters would rise proved too optimistic. What is more, for security reasons the area was evacuated twenty hours before the flood's peak, making it impossible to move the library holdings higher once it was clear the high water predictions were wrong. By the time people were allowed back in the area, not only were the books and journals soaked, but mold had set in.

About 60 to 65 percent of the library's holdings were lost in the flood. These holdings included 400 journals (some of them, such as *Acta Mathematica*, in complete sets), more than 12,000 monographs, 6,500 sets of lecture notes, and 4,500 textbooks. In addition, the library had about 7,000 rare mathematical books, including many volumes of collected works of Cauchy, Weierstrass, and other important mathematicians. These rare books were entirely destroyed. According to Jiří Veselý of the Mathematical Institute at Charles University, a tally of what the library had spent on the holdings that were destroyed comes to about US\$3 million. But this underestimates the actual loss, because, for example, the rare books had greatly increased in

value since their acquisition. Some of the books were frozen and then dried, but in the end only about 15 percent of those could be saved. Veselý said the library plans to scan some of them, but it will be a long and costly procedure. "The annual budget of our math library is about twenty times smaller than what was lost, and many items we could not buy for any price," he said. "They are lost forever."

Over the past five years, many institutions and publishers all over the world have made donations to help rebuild the library. Veselý said that help from the AMS was especially important, because it included not only donated materials but also discounts for acquiring new materials. "Bers's collection was rather big and extremely useful," he said, with books in a broad range of areas—and all of the books were in excellent condition. The books in fluid dynamics are of particular interest to the Charles University group that works in mathematical modeling.

Nachlass Finds Its Best Home

When Ruth and her brother, Victor, finally sorted through their father's *Nachlass*, they found not only his mathematics library but also many letters and documents. Among these was a large collection of reprints of papers by Bers. Ruth and Victor plan to donate the reprints to the American Institute of Mathematics, which has an extensive reprint collection. And there was an even bigger treasure: a collection of letters from and to Paul Erdős, who was an old friend of Bers from the time when they were on the faculty together at Syracuse University and who occasionally visited the Bers family home. The letters, some of which date from the 1940s, have been entrusted to Ronald Graham of the University of California, San Diego, who is the literary executor of the Erdős estate.

Lipman Bers was a man who cared deeply about those around him—his family, his students, and his colleagues, as well as many others on whose behalf he fought for human rights. "My father was not very interested in worldly goods, but he loved his mathematics library," Ruth noted. "It was clear that the books were something he treasured." That the books should go to Prague and arrive at a time when Charles University really needed them—that, said Victor, "would have really pleased him."

Further information on the AMS book donation program is available on the AMS website at <http://www.ams.org/employment/bookdonation.html>. To make or request a donation, please send email to bookdonations@ams.org, or phone the AMS at 800-321-4267, ext. 4096 (in the U.S.), or 401-455-4096 (from outside the U.S.). Those interested in helping the Charles University mathematics library should contact Jiří Veselý, email jvesely@karlin.mff.cuni.cz.