Letters to the Editor

The Mathematical Intelligencer *encourages comments about the material in this issue. Letters to the editor should be sent to the editor-in-chief, Chandler Davis.*

How to Write about Teichmüller

The Spring 1995 issue of *The Mathematical Intelligencer* contains two very different contributions, by M. R. Chowdhury (pp. 12–14) and B. Booss-Bavnbek (pp. 15–20), which pick up our article on the life and work of Oswald Teichmüller in the *Jahresbericht der Deutschen Mathematiker-Vereinigung* 94 (1992), 1–39. Chowdhury's text, with which we have only minute differences, is written as a service to the reader of the *Mathematical Intelligencer*, providing a partial translation of and commentary on Teichmüller's infamous letter to Edmund Landau of November 1933, which had been first published in the appendix to our article on Teichmüller. In contrast to this, Booss-Bavnbek's article appears in the "Opinion" column of *The Mathematical Intelligencer* and aims at fundamental criticism.

This criticism is directed partly against the general editorial policy of the journal *Jahresbericht DMV* in matters of obituaries of German mathematicians. We also feel quite uneasy about some of the obituaries that have appeared in the *Jahresbericht DMV*. For instance, we consider Leichtweiß's biographical remarks on Karl Strubecker, quoted by Booss-Bavnbek, generally superficial and occasionally offensive. One of our motivations for publishing the Teichmüller article in the *Jahresbericht DMV* was in fact to help improve the quality of these obituaries.

Bernhelm Booss-Bavnbek expresses an emphatic normative position on how to deal with the difficult and painful history of the Nazi period. We do not want to pass over our basic differences with him in silence. Booss-Bavnbek seems to believe that the historian ought to be some sort of moral teacher; the more rigidly the teacher declares that certain protagonists of his story were bad guys, the more effectively he educates the readers for a better future.

We hold a more sceptical, but certainly not cynical, view. Moral condemnation seems to us to be but a frail protection against a hideous past. We believe instead in close and detailed confrontation with the historical material. Of course we do place ourselves in the universe of values when we approach and present a historical subject. But we try to do so in a tempered, controllable, and criticizable manner. This was openly stated in the introduction to our article on Teichmüller.

Our restriction to documented evidence[1] seemed to

[1]For instance, it is virtually certain that it was Ernst Witt, not Oswald Teichmüller, who participated (wearing SA uniform) in Emmy Noether's seminar on Hasse's notes on Class Field Theory, which she held privately at her home in the summer of 1933 because she had already been put on leave by the ministry. Thus footnote 3 in Booss-Bavnbek's article almost certainly relates a flawed piece of oral history. See Clark Kimberling, "Emmy Noether and her Influence," in: *Emmy Noether, A Tribute to her Life and Work*, James W. Brewer & Martha K. Smith (ed.), New York, Basel (M. Dekker), 1981, pp. 3–61; here: p. 12, and footnote 13, p. 47. In an early first draft of N. Schappacher, "Das Mathematische Institut der Universität Göttingen 1929–1950" in: Becker, Dahms, Wegeler (Hrsg.), *Die Universität Göttingen unter dem Nationalsozialismus*, München (K.G. Saur), 1987, 345–373, Schappacher also conjectured that Teichmüller was the one. This was corrected in a letter by Fenchel; but the mistake has unfortunately survived in: C. Tollmien, " 'Sind wir doch der Meinung, daß ein weiblicher Kopf nur ganz ausnahmsweise in der Mathematik schöpferisch tätig sein kann . . .'—Emmy Noether 1882–1935. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Habilitation von Frauen an der Universität Göttingen." *Göttinger Jahrbuch* 38 (1990), 153–219; here footnote 188.

us natural when writing about a man whose contradictory personality and whose despicable political ideas and actions have given rise to many anecdotes whose accuracy is impossible to ascertain. However, since we dwelt quite a bit in the article on the—previously unpublished—leading rôle of Teichmüller in the Landau boycott, it is incomprehensible to us how any careful reader could conclude that we were attempting to rehabilitate Teichmüller's politics.

Our refusal to make Teichmüller into a "negative hero"—which seems to have caused the most serious misunderstandings of our article—was simply motivated by a desire to show that Teichmüller was not a lonely "hero" who single-handedly forced Landau's resignation by organizing the student boycott. In fact, for the boycott to have been successful, the new ministerial policy (in the fall of 1933) was needed, which made it possible to get rid of Jewish professors disregarding the exceptions stipulated in the racist clauses of the law of April 7, 1933. Only a gross misreading of the text could make it possible to interpret our formulation as saying that we wanted to excuse Teichmüller for his action, and put all the blame on the state administration, as Booss-Bavnbek suggests (pp. 16–17). Had such a reading occurred to us, even in our worst nightmares, our sentence would have probably come out different, and better!

Clearly, the biographical section 1. of the article on Teichmüller, written by Scholz, is not a full-fledged biography which lives up to the principles laid out nicely in the quotation from Söderqvist towards the end of Booss's article. To go further in this direction would have called for a closer investigation of the genesis of mentalities in Weimar Germany (and earlier) which prepared large parts of the German population to support or actively participate in Nazi politics, whereas others kept a sceptical distance, practised disobedience, or, in a few cases, took up active resistance. Such a major work could not be our goal in that article.

We are also perfectly aware that sections 2–6 of the article on Teichmüller, surveying most of Teichmüller's papers, do not represent a satisfactory history of the mathematical questions that Teichmüller addressed. To give more would have required an effort, and an expertise, which seemed beyond our capabilities. In this sense Booss-Bavnbek's remarks (p. 16) concerning the contributions of Grötzsch, Lavrent'ev, and Schiffer to the early development of "Teichmüller theory" are welcome. But to insinuate that our failure to mention these mathematicians might have something to do with their being (quoting Booss-Bavnbek) an "anti-Nazi," a "Soviet mathematician," and a "Jew forced to emigrate," verges on slander.

We are acutely aware of the limitations of our publication. At the same time, we see no merit in the wholesale condemnation of our partial achievements on the basis of normative ideals. Historical understanding is reached through discourse and controversies—preferably, controversies more to the point than this one.

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Bernhelm Booss-Bavnbek Replies

This exchange has been helpful and enlightening. It is fortunate it could be conducted in *The Mathematical Intelligencer;* I would have preferred that also the pages of the *Jahresbericht* would be open to such dialogue. Did N. Schappacher and E. Scholz express themselves in favor of this?

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Il Circolo Matematico di Palermo

In *The Mathematical Intelligencer,* vol. 17, no. 2, 1995, in the *Letters to the Editor* there is a list of the oldest mathematical societies of the world, but it fails to include one of the most famous: *Il Circolo Matematico di Palermo,* founded in Palermo on March 2th, 1884 by the Italian mathematician G.B. Guccia (1855–1914). *Il Circolo Matematico di Palermo* was internationally known, and among its fellows were all the greatest mathematicians of the world.

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More on Magnus

I much enjoyed Abe Shenitzer's "In Memory of My Friend Wilhelm Magnus" in the Spring 1995 issue of *The Mathematical Intelligencer*. I, too, have experienced Magnus as one of the most considerate and polite persons I ever met.

I got to know Magnus in my first semester at Göttingen in 1947 when he taught *Differential- und Integralrechnung I* to beginning students. At one point during a lengthy proof he had used the same letter t twice for two different variables. When I called this out to him, he thanked me profusely, bowing several times in my general direction (he couldn't identify the source—there were some 200 students in the audience). Then Magnus started to crank down the blackboard, marking all earlier t's with primes. For some high t's that he couldn't reach, he jumped up in the air to apply the proper primes—on the fly, so to speak. To catch his breath, he interrupted the priming once or twice, turning around, bowing, and thanking his unseen benefactor again. After another 10 minutes into the proof the two t's, the primed and the unprimed, occurred in the same equation, whereupon Magnus stopped and turned to the audience one more time, exclaiming, "Es wäre eine *Katastrophe* geworden. Nochmals vielen Dank, vielen Dank!"

At the end of the semester, beginning students had to undergo a *Fortsetzungsexamen*, which determined the right to continue their studies. Magnus's colleague, Arnold Schmidt (known as "Hilbert's last assistant"), who taught *Analytische Geometrie und lineare Algebra*, announced the results with the words, "Das Ergebnis des Fortsetzungsexamens war *niederschmetternd*"—The result of the examination was *crushing* (whereupon the lectern on which he was leaning actually collapsed). But in spite of this ominous announcement, most students actually received passing grades.

How did Magnus handle this onerous task for *his* course? He read about 200 individual names, one after the other, always adding, "Sie haben bestanden"—you passed. Then, at the end of this long recitation, he invited the (few) students whose names he had *not* called out to come to his office, where he broke the sad news in complete privacy.

When I visited Magnus at New York University in 1955, now myself an immigrant to the U.S., the first thing he did was to apologize—apologize for the modest *Hundehütte* (kennel) in which he had to receive me (modest compared to his lavish director's office at the *Mathematisches Institut* in Göttingen).

Magnus loved America but he was also a keen observer of its idiosyncrasies. When he learned that (at age 28) I was still a bachelor, he ventured the prediction that I would either marry within a year or return to Europe—"This is not a country for bachelors." Magnus was right—I married, in February 1956, a Bulgarian who worked for Radio Free Europe and whom I had met three days after my arrival in America. Some of our joint hikes in the "mountains" north of New York City were along routes Magnus had recommended to us.

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Visit to Hua Loo-Keng

Thanks to Shuzhong Zhang and Caspar Schwiegman for their excellent article on Hua Loo-Keng in *The Mathematical Intelligencer*, vol. 16, no. 3. He was a friend of mine, and I published several of his books. I first met him in June 1974, during the "Cultural Revolution." When I asked to see the great mathematician, my host in Beijing said he was "out of town," and only after strong insistence by me did they bring Hua Loo-Keng to my hotel.

Later, after receiving an honorary degree at Nancy, Hua Loo-Keng visited me in Heidelberg, and told me of his life while banished to the countryside. He joked that as a mathematician he could at least do some work in the latrine, writing on toilet paper.

The main feature of his character was deep love for his country.

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Not a Word

My daughter Katerine came home the other day and reported, "There is a new girl in the class who doesn't understand a word of French." Her younger sister Caroline, after a pause for thought, asked, "Which word?"

This should have the makings of a fine homework problem the next time I am telling an undergraduate class about the first-order functional calculus.

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