

# A Conversation with Leopold Schmetterer

Hermann Witting

*Abstract.* Leopold Schmetterer was born on November 8, 1919, in Vienna. He received his doctorate in 1941 and his habilitation in 1949, both from the University of Vienna. Since 1948 he had a permanent lectureship for probability theory, since 1949 for statistics. In 1956 he became full professor at the university of Hamburg. In 1961 he returned to the University of Vienna as a professor of mathematics, since 1971 as a professor of mathematics and statistics. After having been elected an ordinary member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 1971, he was elected Secretary General of this Academy in 1975, a position he held until 1983. In 1972 he received an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Clermont-Ferrand. Some further honors: 1961 Fellow of the IMS, 1967-1971 Vice president of the ISI, election into the Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina and into the Berlin, Saxonian and Bavarian Academies of Sciences. He was visiting professor among others at the University of California at Berkeley, Catholic University in Washington, D.C., Bowling Green State University, Ohio, Technion, Haifa, and the University of Clermont-Ferrand.

The following conversation took place in Freiburg at the beginning of May, 1991.

**Witting:** As your own example shows there has always been personal and scientific exchange between German and Austrian universities in spite of certain differences and independent developments. This is why many questions will refer to the situation in both countries.

But first of all some questions about yourself and the places of your professional life.

## CAREER

**Witting:** When and through what has your interest in mathematics been aroused?

**Schmetterer:** My interest in mathematics started as far as I remember when I was 12 or 13 years old. But it was especially aroused when I discovered a little book on analysis where I found formulas for the logarithm of complex numbers. I was so excited that it is possible to define a logarithm for nonpositive real numbers that from then on I tried to read as many mathematical books as possible. At that time this was not so easy for me

because books were expensive and my family was poor, but nevertheless I found opportunities to read mathematical books, especially books which were concerned with algebra and with differential and integral calculus.

**Witting:** From 1938 you have been studying mathematics, apart from physics and meteorology at the University of Vienna. This was a difficult time for your country because in 1938 Austria had lost its political independence. In which way did these changes have an impact on the mathematical life in Vienna? Which famous mathematicians were at the Viennese university at that time?

**Schmetterer:** Perhaps I should start with your second question. In the thirties there were three personalities, three mathematicians who had a high reputation in their field. I would like to mention Philipp Furtwängler. He was a well-known expert in number theory, and he retired in 1938. Then Hans Hahn, who was certainly one of the founders of modern functional analysis and who died in 1934. And the third one is Wilhelm Wirtinger. He was very famous in the field of the theory of functions of complex variables. He retired in 1935. As a consequence of the new political situation in Austria, some very important younger mathematicians had to leave Austria and emigrated to the United States. I would like to mention Kurt Gödel, Edmund Helly and Karl Menger who did not return from a visit to

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