

# A Conversation with Erich L. Lehmann

Morris H. DeGroot

Erich L. Lehmann was born in Strasbourg, France, on November 20, 1917, and came to the United States in 1940. He received an M.A. in mathematics from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1942 and a Ph.D. in mathematics from the same university in 1946. He has been a faculty member there since that time. He was the Editor of *The Annals of Mathematical Statistics* from 1953-1955, and President of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics in 1961. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1955, 1966, and 1980. He was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1975 and to membership in the National Academy of Sciences in 1978. In February 1985 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Leiden.

The following conversation took place in his home in Berkeley one afternoon in October 1984.

## “THE ONE THING IN WHICH I WAS REALLY INTERESTED WAS GERMAN LITERATURE”

**DeGroot:** Tell me how you got interested in statistics and how you came to the field of statistics.

**Lehmann:** It's a longish story because I have to start way back. I was raised in Germany and I am of Jewish ancestry. In 1933 when the Nazis came into power, my father decided that we had better leave. That was very early April 1933. After some wandering, because I had a brother who was dying and needed to be cared for first, we settled in Switzerland and I went to high school there. At the beginning of my senior year my father asked me “What do you plan to do after you graduate from high school?” The answer was totally obvious. He knew what I was going to say because the one thing in which I was really interested was German literature. Poetry, novels, short stories—I was reading, I was writing. You know the way it is at 17 or 18. That was what excited me, and that was what I wanted to do with my life. So I said, “Well, of course, study German literature.” And he said, “I don't know if that's such a good idea because you can't go to Germany, and studying German literature outside of Germany doesn't make very much sense. You've always had an interest in mathematics. Why don't you study mathematics.” This might seem hard for somebody raised in this country to believe, but I said, “Well, if you think, so, o.k.” [Laughs] It didn't even cause me terrible pangs. I don't know whether I really believed it or not, but anyway I started supposedly studying mathematics in Zurich.

But you know how European universities are. There are no exams or anything, and nobody controls what you do. So I actually went to lectures in literature and

music and history and things like that. I occasionally went to one of the calculus courses, but I really didn't do very much. After a year and a half or two years of that, it looked very much like war. This was 1938, and my father was worried. There was a considerable possibility that the Germans would march through Switzerland, which was not a very comfortable position to be in. So he suggested that I go to England. I got enrolled in Trinity College, Cambridge, and there I really had to start studying more seriously. But there was another very bad obstacle. In those days in Cambridge, when you studied mathematics you also had to study physics and astronomy in at least 50% of your program. That was what the schedule covered.

**DeGroot:** There was no combination of mathematics with other disciplines?

**Lehmann:** No, there was a fixed curriculum and that's what you took. Physics has always been my worst subject in school. I *hated* it. I had the same teacher for mathematics and physics and he said, “You know, if I didn't see the results of your exams, I wouldn't believe it.” I was always the best student in mathematics and I was among the very worst students in physics. Therefore, at Cambridge they told me that I'd better start concentrating on the physics because the mathematics I could sort of take on the wing. The result was I didn't do terribly well in either. I spent all my time studying something that I did not enjoy at all.

**DeGroot:** Was it the physics laboratory that you didn't like?

**Lehmann:** No, it was the mechanics and electricity and that kind of stuff. I guess they didn't call it physics, they called it applied mathematics. I really disliked it intensely. And then somehow at one point