Some Personal Recollections of Harald Cramér on the Development of Statistics and Probability

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The late 1960s and early 1970s were a heady time for a young assistant professor in the Department of Statistics at the University of North Carolina. Raj Bose, Harold Hotelling, and Wassily Hoeffding were among the legendary names of people who daily walked the corridors of Phillips Hall. Distinguished visitors were frequently around as well, including such figures as Egon Pearson and Harald Cramér. Professor Cramér visited the Department in the early part of March of 1970 for about 2 weeks. On the 3rd of March, Dr. Cramér gave a seminar on his personal recollections. The hour ended before his recollections did, however. Always a friendly person, he kindly sat with me for several additional hours discussing the history of statistics and probability from his own perspective. Those conversations with me, which luckily I had the presence of mind to tape record, took place on the 4th and 13th of March 1970. The recollections contained in the body of this article are a lightly revised version of that taped seminar and conversations. My questions have been edited out, although even this was a minimal change. Professor Cramér needed only the slightest of hints to thoroughly explore a topic. I have also taken the liberty to complete sentences, amend grammar, provide a bit of continuity, and clarify slight ambiguities where such problems existed. Otherwise the form and content of Dr. Cramér's thoughts are undisturbed.

Dr. Cramér was born on the 25th of September 1893 in Stockholm, Sweden. He studied mathematics and chemistry at Stockholm University and graduated with a Ph.D. in pure mathematics from Stockholm University in 1917. His earliest published work (von Euler and Cramér, 1913) predates his Ph.D. by 4 years and is a paper on the biochemistry of yeasts. His earliest English language paper (Cramér, 1920), was on the topic of prime number theory. From 1917–1929, Cramér served as Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Stockholm University. He became Professor of Mathematical Statistics and Actuarial Mathematics at Stockholm University in 1929. He remained in that position until 1958, but took on the added responsibility of President of Stockholm University in 1950. In 1958, Dr. Cramér became Chancellor of the entire Swedish university system. He retired from active Swedish university service in 1961, but retained an active professional career for the next two decades. He was Visiting Professor at various universities around the world. He received honorary degrees from Princeton University in 1947, Copenhagen in 1950, Stockholm in 1964, Helsinki in 1971, Edinburgh in 1972, and Calcutta and Paris both in 1977. Dr. Cramér was awarded the Guy Medal in Gold by the Royal Statistical Society in 1972. His publishing career spanned some seven decades from 1913–1982.

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