

JOSEPH FELS RITT

All Columbia College mathematics students came under the influence and scrutiny of J. F. Ritt in his introductory course on the solution of differential equations. To many teachers this subject presents no particular fascination; we appear to have here a not too well connected collection of facts and methods whose presentation would not at first glance seem very enlivening. But Ritt gave this material a characteristic glow. In all branches of mathematics he was an avid student of the past; in the field of differential equations he was a particularly distinguished authority. In his classes his own mind recreated the greatness of a golden period of our subject with special emphasis on the contributions of the French school, ever dear to him. It was in this course that the writer first met Professor Ritt. In the ensuing twenty-four years, my relations with him were constant as a younger colleague and friend. His recent death has terminated a career of outstanding distinction. His scientific achievements in the contemporary mathematical scene are truly impressive. A necessarily brief summary of his life work is given in the later pages of this article. It should be recorded here that on numerous occasions Ritt expressed the belief that a man's work should speak for him and that vitae or obituaries were artificial and superfluous commentaries on the ebb and flow of history.¹

Ritt was born on August 23, 1893 in New York City. His early education in the city included two years at the College of the City of New York. He obtained the degree of Bachelor of Arts from George Washington University in 1913. The same institution honored him with the bestowal of the degree of Doctor of Science in 1932. After some years as a graduate student at Columbia University, where he came under the influence of Professors Fite and Kasner, he obtained in 1917 the Ph.D. for a work which is fresh even now. Ritt referred frequently and with affectionate pride to his dissertation. Except for two years spent as a Master Computer in the Ordnance Department, (1918-1919), he spent the remainder of his life at Columbia. In 1928 he married Miss Estelle Fine who for over twenty years was her husband's devoted companion. Together they labored at the preparation of his many manuscripts, they relaxed in travel to various

¹ In the preparation of the manuscript valuable help was received from many friends. Mrs. Ritt very kindly checked the bibliography. The members of the department of mathematics at Columbia as well as E. L. Post and B. P. Gill made valuable suggestions. Two paragraphs on some deeper aspects of the work in differential equations (low-power theorem, difference equations) are due to Ellis Kolchin.