

HARALD BOHR

April 22, 1887–January 22, 1951

Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, lived, learned and taught there, and died there; but liked to visit near and far. His father was Christian Bohr, Professor of physiology at the medical school; his mother was Jewish, and he had to flee the country in 1943, going then to Sweden for two years. During his last years he was Master of the one resident college in Copenhagen and he greatly enjoyed being surrounded by young people. Bohr was a very friendly person, kind and good-natured, chatty but not indiscreet, and he made and kept to his friends all his life. For all that, he was a shade melancholy, but this side of him was brightened by being married exceedingly happily. In his younger years he had been a football (or rather soccer) player of some renown, a rare enough occurrence among budding savants on the Continent. In after-years he would trounce a ball if he saw one, but he did not look much of an athlete.

Bohr's fame is his almost periodic functions. He did the theory in his mid-thirties, and very little in other topics afterwards. He wrote afterwards many papers in his theory, though, and rather substantial ones too. But the vim of the first papers did not return, and by now Bohr lives forth as much in the work of others as in his own. Privately, he gloried in the interest his theory has evoked and he would help to propagate it. He loved to lecture, and he lectured extremely well. In an individual lecture, no matter how learned the audience, he would first recite the definition and basic properties and make introductory comments; and he would do the same in print even when full references were included.

Whether he had an opinion as to future potentialities of the theory we do not know. Right now it is rather quiet about the theory, except for some distant rumbling in the field of automorphic functions, especially of several variables, which might precipitate in a new shower of almost periodicity. However that may be, it may be said that Harald Bohr has had the good fortune of having a very distinctive theory of magnitude very clearly and originally attached to his name, and this, after all, is as much as a mathematician may expect to secure for himself in a lifetime.

When Bohr was a student the study of mathematics at Copenhagen was not organized, and Bohr learned in a somewhat haphazard way from persons like the geometer Zeuthen, the astronomer Thiele, and the analyst Niels Nielsen (cylinder functions) who made a fierce