

“When I’m in a good mood, I do some mathematics to feel even better. When I’m in a bad mood, I do some mathematics to banish that bad mood”, this is how once Pál Erdős quoted Alfréd Rényi.

Honourable Professors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Fellow Scientists,

We are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of a genius, who – in Rényi’s sense – was in a good mood in most of his life, and in the rest tried to banish the bad one. He was a truly exceptional mathematician, who achieved outstanding results in number theory, combinatorics, set theory and probability theory. He worked in almost every branch of mathematics; and achieved equally outstanding results in the practical application of mathematics.

"A mathematician" as he liked to say, "is a machine for turning coffee into theorems."

1 521 scientific publications, significant theorems and proofs stand as clear evidence of the supremely rich, lively and „merry” oeuvre of an exceptional mathematician’s mind.

For Pál Erdős, mathematics was life; we may therefore presume that by understanding his mathematics, we may study the fundamental structure of his life. „We can engage in mathematics under any circumstance”, he claimed, „even in the internment camp”.

Pál Erdős solved many deep mathematical problems. However, his mathematics was not only the science of solutions but also the science of recognising and grasping problems. Some believe, including the Abel Prize winner Hungarian mathematician Endre Szemerédi, that his greatness lay in having elevated the ability to recognise mathematical problems to an almost artistic level.

Good answers can only be obtained if we ask the right questions. This is how this exceptional mathematician, this unique mind, Pál Erdős inspired generations of scientists for a whole century to work out new proofs and truly scientific answers.

The child prodigy was shaped into a world-famous mathematician, a unique individual and a memorable scientist by the scientific view of life brought from home and a cruel and stormy century. The man who loved only numbers – this was the title of his biography. However, all of us who are celebrating the 100th anniversary of his birth today at this conference are well aware that the word „only” in this context does not mean exclusion but, on the contrary, inclusion.

The large number of co-authors, the Erdős number, the mathematical questions posed and answered and the prizes established and awarded all stand as proof of the fact that these numbers are not only about themselves but also about the scientific community and the future of science.

Honourable Participants of this Centennial Celebratory Conference,

Pál Erdős recalled in a number of interviews that he was four years old when he told his mother that if we deduct 250 from one hundred, we obtain 150 beneath zero.

Today, we should only add to this 100, Erdős's one hundred years. This conference, the lectures of all those to whose careers he made a contribution, whether directly or indirectly, serves to celebrate him. Perhaps, also with a view to indicate that Erdős may not have been fully right on one thing; namely when he said, in his very own, unmistakable style, that the human destiny was pessimistic, at least inasmuch as man lives for a short time and is dead for a long time. The number and the prominence of the participants of this conference in my view is a clear proof, that even if Pál Erdős is not alive, his memory, his impact and legacy is still living and will live for a very long time.

Now, when in my capacity as the President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences I welcome all of you here and salute Pál Erdős, I sincerely hope that this conference will indeed prove that his memory, his impact and legacy is still very much alive.

I wish you all an important and thought-provoking conference with Pál Erdős's own invitation:

“Are your brains open?”

Thank you for your attention!