Letter to 11th Novembertagung participants

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LETTER TO 11TH NOVEMBERTAGUNG PARTICIPANTS

Vienna, October 2000

Dear collegues![1]

The article *The Humanistic Aspects of Mathematics and Their Importance* by Philip J. Davis, published in the book *Essays in Humanistic Mathematics* (A. White, Ed., 1993) was the best text which I could find on the theme of this year's Novembertagung. In the first part of the article Davis elaborates on the sciences/humanities-split in general and not so much on mathematics, which is central in the second part. Nevertheless I think that many thoughts in the first part are important for a field like history of mathematics which lies exactly on the science/humanity border. History of science (and of mathematics in particular) has to struggle for acceptance in both disciplines: history and science (mathematics).

That is why historians of mathematics often have to answer the question: Why should history of mathematics be important for mathematics or for history? The general belief is that history of science (mathematics) is second class work – in the eyes of professional mathematicians and historians. Somehow it doesn't fit also in the now so fashionable "cultural studies" who have their own mafia as well. So for history of mathematics there is (like for mathematics education, which is by the way easier to defend) the danger of "inbreeding". I will tell you in Brno what I exactly mean by this.

Or maybe history of mathematics could serve, as Davis writes at the end of his article, as a means for synthesizing separate cultures? How can this be initiated?

In recent studies about professional communities E. Wenger introduced the concept of a broker, a person who is at the same time member of different so-called communities-of-practice and who can influence the practices and values of one community by introducing practices and values of another. Exactly this is what historians of mathematics could do.

[1] This is the letter that was sent, as is usual, to all the participants of Novembertagung together with the article quoted. The discussion of the article was held on the first day of Novembertagung, following the introduction given by Emil Simeonov.

They could be broker between a (or "the") mathematical community and a ("the") community of historians.

I hope that all the problems raised in Davis' article are basis enough for an interesting discussion at the beginning of the conference.

See you all in Brno,

Emil Simeonov

P.S.: Since we agreed in Denmark on "Mathematics and Language" as a subtopic to the theme "Mathematics and Culture", I have two additional suggestions for topics which go in that direction:

— There is a changing balance between formal and informal language in mathematical exposition.

— A historical comparison of the exposition in textbooks and research papers and also in popular books could be interesting in terms of language.