

A CHANGE OF ERAS: OBSERVATIONS OF A STRANGER

PGL Leach

The invitation, doubtlessly engineered by the distinguished Russian mathematician LEV BERKOVICH, to participate in the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Publications of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, University of Belgrade, Series: Mathematics and Physics* could not be refused.

The conference was set to take place in Belgrade. My knowledge of the area was limited. I knew a bit about the history of the Serbs clawing their homeland back from the Turks, the incident in Sarajevo, the ascendancy of TITO and the more recent process of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. For me as a youth in post-WWII Australia there were pictures of the partisans operating in rather rugged country and people who left the country seeking another life.

I have spent most of my life in the Southern Hemisphere (Australia and South Africa), but have strong connections with some parts of Europe. Serbia was not one of those parts. I accepted the invitation for reasons combining my relationship with some of the attendees and an interest in that part of the world. I ‘persuaded’ one of my Greek collaborators to share the adventure with me and the beginning of September found us in Belgrade.

Belgrade and its surrounds came as a bit of a surprise. The rugged country of the partisans was the flood plain of the rivers Danube and Sava. The city was generally attractive, apart from some bombed buildings which left me quite ill – I have experienced some minor bombings by terrorists, but the bombing in Belgrade was on an international scale – and angry at the perpetrators of such assaults on everyman.

The conference was to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the *Publications of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, University of Belgrade, Series: Mathematics and Physics* by D. S. MITRINOVIĆ, a distinguished Serbian mathematician. In addition to a solid Serbian contingent there were participants from twenty-three other countries covering every continent apart from Antarctica. It was evident that some of the delegates were associates of Serbian mathematics from a long time past even though from distant countries.

The themes of the meeting were unusual in that they covered differential equations, analysis and discrete mathematics with an emphasis on graph theory. Nevertheless the participants managed to coexist peacefully! One obvious feature of the lectures was their high mathematical content. Generally the papers were presented in the current international language. Some were in Serbian and, being one of the World's more accomplished nonlinguists, I have a great sympathy for those speakers. As it happened, the accompanying visual material made the context intelligible. That is one of the consolations of Mathematics.

In many respects the meeting was a learning experience for me. Talk after talk referred to the work of Serbian mathematicians and scientists in general. Of this I was ignorant and so doubly thankful that I had been invited to join the celebration of the anniversary.

Historically journals have been published by learned societies and universities. The *Publications of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, University of Belgrade, Series: Mathematics and Physics* is one of many which reflect this tradition to be found not only in Europe but in other places, India for example. For reasons which are not immediately obvious the proceedings/reports of a faculty no longer seem to attract the respect they formerly had. In the case of the *Publications of the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, University of Belgrade, Series: Mathematics and Physics* the present meeting was asked to suggest a new title for the journal. A 'secret ballot' was held and the new title *Applicable Analysis and Discrete Mathematics* adopted. I have to confess that this was not my idea, but that of THEMISTOCLES RASSIAS. I could only congratulate him on a better name than that of which I thought.

This conference was unusual in that we had the question of the name of the journal to be decided. In other respects it was very much mainstream in that we enjoyed a civic reception by the Deputy Mayor of the City at one of the palaces in the centre of the city, a guided tour of the old town, a concert and a fashion show in a gallery of frescoes from ancient churches and an excursion to mountain Fruška Gora, town Sremski Karlovci and the monastery Krušedol, which looked completely unlike my idea of Serbia. MILAN MERKLE contrived an excellent combination of scientific and cultural activities. As a personal aside my Greek colleague and I visited Topola to see the mausoleum of the former Royal Family. We are both into mosaics and were suitably impressed.

The beauty of the Serbian people and their constant smile on their faces, even though history has treated them badly, made a strong impact. I hope that MILAN MERKLE and the rest of the organizers do think towards a sequel to this productive meeting in order for all of us who took part in this one and the many others who were not fortunate enough to be present have the opportunity to return to Serbia once again.