

What to expect when staying long in **Oberwolfach**





Preliminaries and definitions

Just so you know the setting of the whole thing: I am a postdoc who works at the Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. As an add-on to my grant, I applied for a three month stay as a Leibniz Fellow in the Mathematisches Forschungsinstitut Oberwolfach, which I was very lucky to get. My motivation was that this stay allowed me to invite up to one researcher at a time, and work with them. As a by-product I'd get a year without any teaching obligations at my university, since they didn't have to pay me for that year. Indeed, both these things are valuable, but what I did not expect was that meeting so many mathematicians and hearing and living so many stories would be such an exceptional experience. After all, there's no place in the world where you meet 40plus mathematicians every week!

At some point I started writing down some of the stories I heard and experiences I've had, out of fear of forgetting what I experienced here. But after a while I realized that perhaps my stories would be interesting to others. So, I polished my "rough notes" into some readable stories, kicked out the most boring ones, and this is what is left. Hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing them!

Different and similar atmospheres

There were quite some things which were the same for almost all groups coming to Oberwolfach. Every week someone asks aloud what the algorithm for dividing the napkins is. Several times I heard “It must be no coincidence that ...” and then a statement like “that I sat with that person already three times” or “I am always sitting at this table”. The longer the week lasted, the later people came to dinner. And there are a few like that.



But of course the interesting thing are the *differences*, observed mainly by having dinner with them. They all had their own “things”. One workshop they ONLY talked about mathematics, and ONLY on their subject. Not that they ignore you, they talk to you too, but you’re supposed to nod your head as they say some “obvious things”. Then another workshop no one would dare to start eating. It always took someone staying longer (like me) to start. During one workshop people mostly sat down on the right side of the named napkins, but a few of the workshops people sat to the left of their napkins. One workshop the people would come very late on Monday to dinner, and no matter how much later I came each day, I was always the first. One workshop was a collection of smart, shy people who didn’t know each other. At dinner there was silence. I’d try to break it by saying something friendly to my neighbor, who would shyly respond. After which we returned to listening to the scratching of knives and forks on the plates. Then another workshop it was like a group of Old (and Young) Friends meeting each other. Quite a change! At one workshop most people embraced when they met, whereas I didn’t witness *any* embraces at other workshops. One workshop the evenings were kind of boring to me, as almost everyone was playing games which involve *thinking*. That doesn’t appeal to me, to make competition with someone else’s *brain*, after doing a full day of *mathematics!*



people work in: you'd see way more suits and ties. Also there appeared to be quite a difference in the alcohol consumption each week. They wouldn't give me figures on that, though!

An old man.

One of the weeks I met a man at the door who was quite old, and got to talk to him. It seemed like he had retired many years ago, and wanted to copy something in the library. He was very nice, and we talked German. I helped him across the snow, and we talked about math-related things I can't remember. He copied a few pages from the book. All that made me completely unprepared about what was to come.

What I also don't remember was how we came to talk about *Inventiones*. For me, that's (one of) the most prestigious math journals. But he said: "When we founded it" - (*we??*) - "it was a journal founded by rebellious mathematicians."

So I got confused.

He started talking about some anecdotes of that time, about how one of the co-founders rejected a paper of a famous mathematician for *Inventiones* in the beginning times. Translated, the report said: "Tell the author the following: *A finite sequence is not a theorem.*" Don't know what that was about, but it prompted a quite exceptional reaction of the author of the paper: he became very enthusiastic about the journal *Inventiones*, stating that the journal would have a great future. That was quite right, yes.

The old man's name was Remmert. I started to become even more sus-

But then again, that wasn't as bad as that workshop where almost all people did *work* all evening long. If you don't care much about their stuff, it can make evenings quite boring.

Then again, some evenings were very nice as people sat and talked (often involving some degree of wine). One of the staff told me that one can see differences in the amount of money behind the field the

picious. I heard that name before. Since we talked more, I started to puzzle things together. He worked in complex analysis in several variables, and was one of the founders of the field.

And then he started talking about Weyl. Hermann Weyl, to me that is a name from *books*, like *Peter Pan*. He talked about him like he saw him yesterday, at the exact institute where I was now. I was more and more puzzled.

Later that night, I checked the internet. Of course there was a wikipedia site of Remmert. He was the longest active editor of the *Inventiones*. And co-founder. He was one of the developers of the theory of complex spaces. And many a German learnt (and learn) complex analysis by his book.

A few weeks later one of my collaborators told me that the chair at his department was jealous of me meeting Remmert. I almost start to fantasize that if I am very old, coming to the Oberwolfach institute, talk to people about meeting Remmert. Reinhold Remmert, that is a name from books. Like Harry Potter.



Food

Most people enjoy the food at Oberwolfach a lot, and many people eat way more than they normally do.

Think what happens if you stay for three months.

After the first six weeks I had gained quite some pounds, so I really had to put me on a leash (which indeed worked in reversing the damage). Note that the food changes each week - I rarely (if ever!) saw something twice. Oh, and there's always plenty of food. Well, except for this one time: I remember being able to eat literally three times as much as I do now when I was twenty, and staying a skinny bugger. One of the seminar-weeks had mainly young people. It was the first time the food at lunch at my table was empty, even if I ate not very much. And even then some of my table-companions were

looking for some leftovers from other tables. Like ravenous vultures the guys (of course guys) from my table were scanning the dining room, plate in hand. After that lunch they upped the amount for that week, and it didn't happen again. Apparently, even young people can get *stuffed*...

Am I me?

In statistics, you have the "Law Of Small Odds At Statistics Conferences". Which means that things with small odds happen more often at statistics workshops. Let me give you an example.

While there was a statistics workshop, I was in the library looking at some books. Someone came up to me and said:

"Excuse me, are you Stefan?"

Me, surprised: "Yes I am."

He: "Oh, but you are not the Stefan I was looking for. "

That was confusing.

"But I *am* Stefan."

"Yes, but that's a *coincidence*. I'm looking for some *other* Stefan. You just happen to look like him from a distance!"

Furthermore, the guy who thought I was Stefan, and that particular doppelganger-Stefan, are two of the five persons I know of who attended *two* workshops during the period that I was there. The World is Weird.

Immersed in Statistics

This week made clear to me that doing mathematics is a social activity. I had no guest, and there was this workshop on a statistical subject. Now you must know that I had quite an aversy of statistics. I do algebra. (Like that explains it.)

Nevertheless, the people were really nice and interesting. They differed





quite a bit from some statisticians I experienced while studying: they did statistics like I do mathematics. Which of course makes sense - it *is* mathematics, and I knew that in my mind, but I never *felt* it before that way. So you talk to them. And you start to think about your own stuff. So at the end of the week I was computing how to use my own field in statistics. A few weeks later, at *another* statistics workshop, I learned that my idea was probably quite ridiculous. But the point was that I was doing *statistics*. And *liked it*. In fact, later on I noticed that the workshops where I liked the people a lot, made me want to know more about the mathematics, and get involved in their mathematical discussions.

So I realized again: the type of mathematics that you like and do is only partially induced by the subject. It is for a large part the *people* that make it *fun*.

Caged mathematicians + nothing else to do = results

This happened to me two weeks in a row, with my first two guests who stayed longer. Is it so easy?

RECIPE FOR THEOREM

Ingredients:

2 Mathematicians, working in same field, who like each other.

1 Blackboard

Lots of chalk

1 week of time

3 cups of coffee per day

Nothing else to do but walk and play pingpong



Put the mathematicians every day in front of the blackboard, with plenty of chalk. If you want to spice things up, give them paper and pen to write stuff down too. Make sure to remove them regularly to insert some of the coffee in them. Occasionally, move them around the ping pong table or across the hill.

After five days, remove the mathematicians. Put them in front of a computer to type up their theorem.

Good luck!

It's all relative.

I spoke to a man at dinner. He turned out to be Romanian by origin. I complained about the difficulties of getting a permanent position, let alone getting one there where you or your family wants to live. I asked him if he still lived in Romania. The answer was no: he lived in the US. When did he move there? In the seventies.

I continued eating. While chewing, I started thinking. That was quite a while before the Berlin wall fell, eh? So I asked: was it easy to leave the country during those years? No, he was a defector - during a workshop, he had to request asylum, while his wife and kid still lived in Romania. It took about three years and a lot of trouble to get his wife and kid out of Romania to the US where he lives now, and works at a very good university.

Suddenly my position doesn't sound that bad. It's all relative.

Insignificant you are!

Let me mention that many of the workshops are so specialized that I don't even know what the *title* of the workshop *means*, initially. But, I made the resolution to listen to at least one talk each week. That is, to *start* to listen to one talk each week.

The first couple of weeks I left after the first fifteen minutes. Understanding ab-so-lu-te-ly nothing of the basic introduction is not really encouraging, and it is not like it is useful to torment yourself. One talk that I listened to was by someone I knew. Before I went there I asked him what it was about, and he said it was very simple, explained me the basics. Indeed that helped, we (me and my guest) left after half an hour in stead of fifteen minutes.

Later I did follow some talks completely. Partially it had to do because it wasn't as remote from what I do, but partly because you are happy to



understand *something* in the talk. Which means that most of it was still inaccessible, but hey - your standards are adjusted quickly.

Nevertheless - it makes one wonder how large the field of mathematics actually is, and how tiny a cogwheel one is in the big clockwork that is mathematics. Or how one is a pebble on the beach that is mathematics. Or how one is a grain of sand in - well you get the idea.

Working hard

I got the first guest who stayed two weeks in a row, a good friend of mine. He's very smart. I visited him twice before, each one week, and we worked our asses off during these visits. Now it was the same thing, but then two weeks in a row. I was exhausted - but very satisfied! It was long ago that I really worked harder than I am able to, or at least harder than I think I am able to. That was great!

Homesick and horror-scenarios

I married in the beginning of this year, and now due to this stay at Oberwolfach, I was away from home for four months with the exception of three weeks. I missed my three females: the two cats and especially my pretty wife. And perhaps for the first time in my life, I felt really homesick.

I spoke to many people who were in a long distance-relationship, mostly one partner was postdoc. Apparently, it is the standard nowadays, when you are around thirty years old, to be a long distance away from your partner. It is about the age that many people think about building a family. I know a couple which waited to get kids until they got a position close to each other, and then it was too late! A female postdoc told me that she once missed her partner so much that she bought an expensive ticket to fly across the



ocean, just to be with him for one week. I did something similar: I did buy an expensive train ticket home for two weekends in a row. Apparently seeing my girl is like medicine, and it helped a lot. But I hope it will be the last time I am away from her this long.

That brings me to the actual thing I wanted to talk about: the (for me) horror-scenario of the future. I've met a few people here who work at for example Scotland or Texas. And their spouse and kids live elsewhere, like Germany or Spain. And not that they are divorced or something, it's just that it turned out this way. They told me how this happened: at some point, you can only get a position away from home. You are a mathematician, and know that you will become deeply unhappy if you don't do the work you really like. Nobody benefits from you not taking the position and becoming unemployed.

But, your kids go to school in your home country, and it would be hard for them and your spouse to move. Also, moving because you have a nice job there is ok. But moving somewhere because you're following someone's tail is a whole different story: you're only leaving stuff behind and gaining nothing. Hence you kiss your partner and kids goodbye, saying that you will try hard to get a position in your home country.

So you start to long-distance commute, being home only during holidays, hoping it will be temporary. Then, ten years later, it is still like that.

Is that my future? Living away from my wife whom I love? A continuous state of homesickness? Indeed - my horror-scenario.

Frenzy, FRENZY!!

At some point there were again two so-called seminars, meant mainly for younger people (they were lectures on some topics, not workshops). I was in not too good shape due to the hard work the two weeks before, and this homesickness-thing didn't help either.

I worked in the library. And wrote about half a page. I was officially going crazy. The Institute was Getting To Me. Meanwhile there was someone of the seminar studying two tables away from me. Even working during their break? Geez. Luckily I could play some pingpong with the seminar people, which really helped getting rid of some frustration. It was a really nice group of people.

On Thursday I spontaneously decided to join in on one of the seminars: a fellow fellow had recommended it to me. So there I was, completely unprepared, three days behind schedule and missing foreknowledge.

And I *loved* it!

It simply felt good to sit in a lecture again, just like when I was a student! I completely forgot how it was! I was also very, very surprised that the topic simply appealed to me. In fact, it had a very strange effect on me: I turned into a learning-frenzy! I felt myself soaking up whatever I could understand. At lunch I asked the teachers what I should do or read before the next lectures start, to “catch up as much as possible” (the seminar was almost over, for god’s sake!). So I started to read a book, and a paper. When there was no lecture I read, ate, or played ping pong. I fell asleep on a paper and read much of it in the morning. So, in two days I did spend a (for me) *huge* amount of hours on a subject I didn’t know at all before. A few days I was obsessed by the subject and read a lot of other stuff too. Then slowly the frenzy died out, though the interest in the subject still lingers on in me.

This whole experience really surprised me. In the last five years or so, I found it hard to *learn* new stuff, I just liked to *do* new stuff. And here I was, liking to learn something. What was going on?

It took me a while to figure it out. The answer is this: Contrary to what I thought, I don’t mind learning new stuff, in fact I *like* it. But I don’t necessarily like learning what is important to my field! Perhaps I should remember that it may be more important to learn the new stuff that I enjoy in instead of forcefully trying to enjoy the new stuff that I need to learn. Deep, deep...

Ego up, ego down

Do you know those situations where there’s someone in front of the blackboard, enthusiastically explaining something which no-one in the audience understands, and then turns around and asks: “Are there any questions?”



and no one says anything. Interpreting this as a sign that everyone understands, the speaker continues with his unintelligible ramblings. And the eyes in the audience get glazier and glazier.

Well, something similar happened during this seminar. At some point I didn't understand what the teacher was calculating. I didn't want to be the Late Joiner who annoys everyone by asking questions on what they have learned already, so I asked someone to the right. He had NO idea. The two people in front of me. Apparently, I woke them up. They didn't have a clue. The guy a few seats to the left. He didn't know either, though he made a guess.

Ok, so no one knew and no one asked questions. So I decided that I should ask any question I felt like. I did, and it was very good for my ever growing ego to see that I asked good questions (in reality, not completely ridiculous ones). I ridiculed the group dynamics: either people thought they were the only ones not understanding what was happening and were afraid of asking questions, or they simply were beaten to a bloody pulp by previous lectures.

It took me quite a while to realize that it was way more easy for me to ask questions than for the "regular" seminarist. I didn't work in that particular field, and had, in some sense, nothing to lose. As always in life, courage is relative. Bad for my ego.



Swedish conversation

I was sitting next to a man who had lived in Sweden for five years. Apparently, he had learned Swedish very very quickly. I wondered how.

I asked him if he could teach me some Swedish, like “hello”. He told me, just say “En kopp av mjölk” and I’d be fine. It sounded quite a lot like the Dutch version of “A cup of milk” and so I asked him:

“Is this really hello?”

“Oh yes,” he replied, “just say this, and you’ll have a very interesting conversation any time. Answer “En kopp av mjölk” to everything and you will have lots of fun. And you will learn Swedish a lot quicker by making Swedish people laugh.”

So *that* was his secret.

Search committees

Did you ever apply for jobs recently? How many applications did you write? Nowadays it is not uncommon for people to write more than one hundred. Obviously, even for small town universities, there are at least one hundred applicants, often times a multiple of that. You work very, very hard on your cover letter, C.V., and all other stuff that you send to those search committees. You think about every word in that big file you send them. Then, you have the search committee that gets those one hundred applications. Obviously, they will think deeply about who is the Best Person Suited For Their Institute. Discuss, and listen to each others arguments.

Oh boy are you wrong.

I have heard a few people talking about them being in search committees. It is always different, but always different from what *you* think it is, perhaps with the exception of the top universities that can hire those few top candidates. One striking example was the following description of one workshop participant: it is like a ritual dance. At his university, the procedure was that committee members would pick their top ten and then there would be a round of discussion first, before voting. Each member would get their turn to talk about their favorite candidate(s). And then everyone promotes his or her candidate, whom they most of the time asked themselves to apply for the job. And while one is talking, everyone else is listening, but not *listening*. “Interesting candidate you have. I, however, have this candidate: . . .”.

Not all is bad, though. One professor told me about a search at his university, where two good professors actually went to the library to *read* papers of the top candidates, even though they were not of their own field. But, as it seems, such dedication is rare. Mostly, it is a soup of university politics, being your own PR-department, and a slice of being lucky that someone wants you.

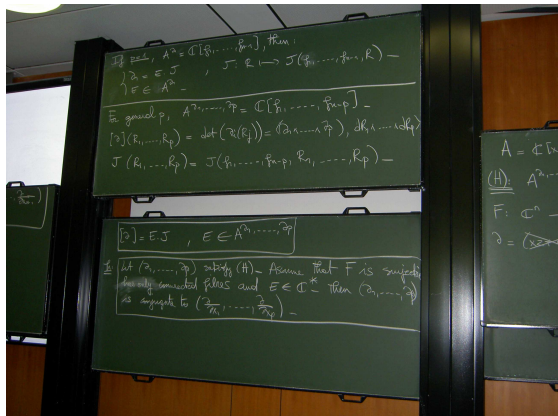
Maybe I shouldn't have told this story to you. Will you be as dedicated to polishing your CV as you were before?

I have peur de Frenglish

I have scars on my soul connected to learning French in high school - I was very, very bad at it, and developed an understandable fear of *Madame Meens*, and her daily call: "Et le tour est pour..." Brrr! Still my French is not very good.

One of the guests I invited was a Japanese guy, who was very funny back in 2001 (or 2002?) when I first met him. He's a very nice person. Back then, he didn't speak English very well, which was very charming in some way.

He learned better English over the years. But the last 1.5 years he lived in France and studied French vigorously, and speaks it quite good right now. Unfortunately, his brain has been swiped clean of much of his English... so there I am, talking English, and he replies in French, etc. etc. After four hours of math discussion I am *exhausted*...



The strange thing is though that one gets used to it, and we meet at middle ground. We both start to speak a very ugly form of Frenglish. Furthermore, it is one of the moments I am grateful for having known Madame Meens.

Though I write the name in fear.

Being the best gives no guarantees?

One of the workshops I got to talk to a very, very friendly older man. He was the type who chuckles every five seconds. We had a pleasant conversation about this and that. I asked him if there were any interesting talks to go to. He pointed a guy out to me who looked quite young and said that he was the best guy around and gave amazing talks. Apparently, in the last so many years he had produced amazing work, solving some long-standing open problems. But he didn't have a job in mathematics for several years. Talking with him I noticed that he was socially able (i.e. no weird personal problems), and indeed his talk, even though I didn't understand much, seemed very coherent, and the reaction of people made clear there were many bright new ideas in the talk. All people, old and young, looked up to him. But he couldn't get a position in his home country, Germany. Was his research subject deemed unimportant? Did he miss the network?

At a later workshop, when I spoke about this, someone said: "Well, but any good painter, sculptor, or other type of artist will be in the same position." Was his research subject *promoted* or *demoted* to art?

Nevertheless, being the best at what you do gives no guarantees, apparently.

Hoping it is contagious

Before I went to Oberwolfach I was lucky to get my picture taken with Sir Michael Atiyah. It's also a little due to the fact that I am someone who just steps up to such a famous person and asks if it is ok to take my picture with them. And then preferably we should look in a particular way, like we are Old Friends that Take Their Picture Together. I am glad that most mathematicians are not like me, for then being a famous mathematician can be very annoying I guess.

The picture hangs in my office at my university. It has two post-it notes on it. One has an arrow pointing to Sir Michael Atiyah, saying: "Fields medal winner, Abel prize winner, founder of K-theory, etc .etc.". The other one has an arrow pointing to me, saying: "Mr. Nobody." It keeps me modest.

That sort of started my idea of taking my picture with famous mathematicians (I mean, I also took pictures with non-famous, most of the time very nice mathematicians!) Staying at Oberwolfach was ideally suited for that.

Similarly to studying by putting a book under your pillow, I have the following hope: That their genius is contagious. And that I contract it too!!

Not completely jealous

I was always very jealous of people in some countries where there is much more of a focus on mathematics. Especially Romania has this trait. Some Romanian kids enter university knowing quite the amount of mathematics. Once I was sitting at the dinner table with a Romanian, and the topic went to this focus on mathematics. I said that I thought that was wonderful.

“Well,” my table companion replied, “it is all how you see it. With us there are some things which are deemed less important, like art or literature. If you are into that, then the school system is not ideal for you.” That was something new to me.

At some point I came to talk with a Romanian woman my age who competed in math olympics from a young age. I immediately said that I was jealous. I should tell you that my own math olympiad story is that the week I wanted to compete for the first time in school, I got really sick. The year after that, my last chance, I passed easily to the nationals. There I ended almost dead last as that was the first day I ever worked on problems beginning with “Prove that...”, even though I was already 18 years old. I knew I could have done better if guided in the right way, but that was not the case. Hence my jealousy of the Romanian system.

But she told me that, while she started to compete at a young age, she stopped at a young age as it was not fun! The training for math competition took her away from normal school for about a month, and isolated her from her classmates. They were taught tricks and methods to solve the problems. Approaching a problem was done by methods, not by creativity. In the end she stopped competing since she hated it all, it spoiled her fun in the doing of math problems, actually.

My jealousy passed. Not completely, but most of it.



Missing my friends

At some points in time you get these stupid revelations about life etcetera. The last so many years I was focussing a lot on getting my career on track, which also meant living abroad, working extremely hard, being away from my girlfriend/wife¹ for a long time, not caring about going somewhere unless I'd visit a mathematician, cutting of hobbies and sports, etc. etc.



Of course, I also had a social life, but I deliberately put it second place. It may be time to put that back where it belongs. It's not that I have few friends, but I have hardly any *new* friends. Meeting new people every week made me realize that I like that - to meet new people. Perhaps not as extreme as here, at Oberwolfach, though: a week is a bit short to make true friends, and even if you do, they tend

to live anywhere sprawled over the world, and it is not likely I'll ever attend a workshop with them again!

But, then again, perhaps I *did* make some new friends here. Time will tell.

The right of a woman

I sometimes guessed nationality of people by listening to their accents. I guessed that someone came from Russia while they came from the U.S. Then I guessed that someone was Dutch (which I am!) but who turned out to be from the U.S. too! So I am quite pathetic at guessing these kind of things.

At some point I sent a picture of one of the female participants to her. I wanted to be a nice guy and say she looked young in the picture. I guessed her to be in her thirties but then I got very insecure about my current guessing abilities. So I checked her CV on the web, and saw that it resembled mine

¹This is one and the same person!

with the dates two years earlier. An educated guess would be she'd be like 34 or 35. So, being the slimy bugger I am, I sent the picture stating that she looked 28. She replied by saying that I definitely know women, as that was right on the spot: she was 29. After reading that, for the first two seconds I was very satisfied with my guessing abilities, after all I was only one year off. But after three seconds I realized that was not true, I had made no guess at all! I looked at her CV again and suddenly it all looked very scary. She got her PhD five years younger than I did, got her master's when she was 19... she was a freakin' genius!! So I emailed her that I was impressed by her career. Then she replied to me the very charming and disarming response:

I have been 29 for a few good number of years now, so no freaking genius. Just using the right of a woman. :)

Minority report

The different workshops harbored a variety of races and ethnicities. The standard is still the White Male. Certain other ethnic groups I encountered regularly, and some none at all. But here I want to talk about the small amount of women. They are still a definite minority!



That's something that I couldn't fathom at a young age already. At that time it was the 80's and I thought that differentiation to sex was something of the past, of the time where it was normal for women to become a housewife and nothing else. I was very surprised to find out that girls in my class performing well in math and physics would still choose not to go into the sci-

entific direction, while all guys performing well (and many who didn't perform well) in these directions did. It shocked me! Also, later I didn't see *any* reason why the amount of female mathematicians would not be 50%. How naïve I was. The world was and still isn't equal. It disturbs me a lot.

At different workshops you encountered different amounts of women. There seemed to be an unexplainable discrepancy between fields. It also gives weird social behavior at times: a few times at dinner it was five guys talking to the one female. (Me being one of the five - it's either that or shut up, which is impossible for me.) That's not really helpful in getting a relaxed atmosphere. I started to not think very highly of the workshop topics where there were very few females. It even *annoyed* me.

Until I realized that in my subject I could only name three females with a postdoc position or beyond. I bow my head in shame.

Errors are necessary

Me and my last guest worked without any ambition. I found it very important to enjoy the last two weeks as much as possible, and having no ambition helps a lot with that. We were supposed to just explain mathematics to each other, take walks, chat about life, drink a beer. No pressure. No goals.

But then we found a short proof of quite a surprising fact. So I emailed my former advisor about if this was known. He told me it would be amazing, and very surprising. So I sent him the very short proof - which of course was wrong! But, the next few days we worked on repairing the proof (or completely replacing the proof), and by now I know that we succeeded.



This happened to me quite often. I find a surprising theorem, go tell someone about it enthusiastically, and show the proof which turn out to be wrong, very wrong, or completely ridiculous. To make a long story short, after a while there is a much more complicated proof of the theorem - but the theorem is true. And I would have *never* thought of proving that theorem if I

didn't make that wrong proof. It's sort of a catalyst.

There's this famous documentary about Fermat's last conjecture, and

Wiles' proof. There is an interview with Shimura in this documentary, where he talks about Tanyama. He says something like "He made a lot of mistakes, but he made them in a good direction. I tried to copy this, but I found out that it is very difficult to make good mistakes."

Of the whole documentary, this quote stuck with me. For I make many, many mistakes in mathematics. But I hope they are *good* mistakes...

The unmentioned stories

There are some small stories that I didn't mention. Like of the mathematician who told me proudly that he played darts with Serre and Tits, and won. Or my father, who came to pick me up, telling a story I never heard, about him going to Sweden for holiday work but returning after one night already, spending all his money and his car just to be able to go home. Or when I decided to take a walk alone in the forest in the bright moonlight, and heard a dog's (wolf's?) bark and a rustling of leaves *very* close by. There are more stories like that, which I didn't write down as it was hard to catch in writing the tiny spark that made them so interesting to me. But I keep them with me, as they are precious to me.

Conclusions and Future Work

So my stay came to an end, and it is time for some concluding last words. First of all, a deep, philosophical statement: I will have to start moving my lazy ass again and cook my own meals, clean up the house, and remove the dirty stuff of the cats from the carpet. I was spoiled for three months.

No, seriously. Whatever you think, you'll agree that Oberwolfach is a special place for a mathematician to be. Its main strength (to me) is that it puts many mathematicians who are interested in the same thing together in a place *where there is no escape!* No shy mathematician can go to their room and flee in the internet (there's normally no internet in rooms). No famous mathematician can hide from *you*, the person who wants to ask stupid questions or take a picture of/with them. No mathematician goes into town after the talks, to enjoy the City Life (there simply is no real city close by, only woods!).⁴ In other words, you're forced to interact - socially! Which also makes it much more acceptable to talk to whomever is there. And for me, doing mathematics is a social activity. I knew it before, and I know it even more now!

Being there for so long a time I feel a sort of connection to the place, and feel a tad bit sad to go home - though I love going home more.

But I will be back. I am sure.

Stefan Maubach
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