

FOUNDING FATHER OF THE EMS

Michael Atiyah[†]

The European Mathematical Society

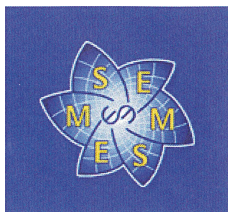
1. THE FOUNDATION MEETING

A major new development on the European scene will be the establishment, later this year, of a European Mathematical Society (EMS). The foundation meeting will be held near Warsaw from October 26th to 30th, 1990, and will be attended by representatives from nearly all European countries*. Many years of preparation have been involved, but it is indeed fortunate that the EMS will be launched at a unique historical moment when so many barriers are breaking down.

The political changes now taking place in Europe have an immense potential, not least in the cultural and scientific area. The EMS is thus coming into existence at just the right moment to develop these new opportunities, and to see that mathematics plays its rightful role in the new Europe that we all hope is now being formed.

In principle the EMS should play the part on the European level that national mathematical societies play in their individual countries. It should concern itself with all aspects of mathematics including education, research, the applications of mathematics and its relation to other sciences. Exactly how it is to operate and what its detailed activities will be, will of course depend on the views and initiatives of the mathematical community. The first steps will be taken at the Warsaw meeting, but the subsequent development will require a wide base of support.

* The manuscript of this article was written in summer 1990. In the meantime the EMS has been founded. A review of the Warsaw meeting is given in a postscript to this paper, see page 5.



ATIYAH led a long endeavour aimed at the creation of the European Mathematical Society. On the occasion of having been awarded the ABEL Prize, ATIYAH and SINGER were interviewed by RAUSSEN and SKAU (see [2]) and one of the questions to ATIYAH was the following:

RAUSSEN and SKAU: You, professor ATIYAH, have been very much involved in the establishment of the European Mathematical Society (EMS) around 1990. Are you satisfied with its development since then?

ATIYAH: [...] It started an awful long time ago, probably about thirty years ago. When I started trying to get people interested in forming a European Mathematical Society in the same spirit as the European Physical Society, I thought it would be easy. [But ...] we spent years arguing about differences. [...] We went on for probably fifteen years before we founded the EMS. [...]

Having been involved with the setup, I withdrew and left it to others to carry on. I have not followed in detail what has been happening except that it seems to be active. I get my newsletter, and I see what is going on.

Roughly at the same time as the collapse of the Berlin Wall, mathematicians in general—both in Europe and in the United States—began to be more aware of their need to be socially involved and that mathematics had an important role to play in society. [...] The EMS took on this role at a European level, and the EMS congresses—I was involved in the one in Barcelona—definitely made an attempt to interact with the public.

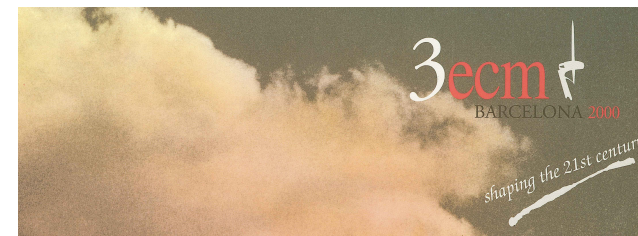
[...]

It is good that the EMS exists; but you should think rather broadly about how it is evolving as Europe evolves, as the world evolves, as mathematics evolves. What should its function be? How should it relate to national societies? How should it relate to the AMS? How should it relate to the governmental bodies? It is an opportunity! It has a role to play!

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Reception at the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (IEC) on October 24, 1997. From left to right: Manuel Castellet, President of IEC; Sir Michal Atiyah, President of the Scientific Committee of the 3ECM; Vladimir Igorevich Arnold, member of the Scientific Committee; Sebastià Xambó Descamps, president of the Societat Catalana de Matemàtiques and of the Executive Committee of the 3ECM.

Sources

- [1] M. ATIYAH: *The European Mathematical Society*. In: *Miscellanea Mathematica* (PETER HILTON, FRIEDRICH HIRZEBRUCH and REINHOLD REMMERT, editors), Springer-Verlag, 1991.
 [2] Martin Raussen and Christian Skau: *An Interview With Michael Atiyah and Isadore Singer*. European Mathematical Society Newsletter, September 2004, pages 24-30. [This interview also appeared in the Notices of the AMS, Volume 52, Number 2 (February 2005), p. 223]

[†] The excerpts in the images are from the first page in [1].