

Opening at the 18th European Women in Mathematics meeting

<https://sites.google.com/site/ewm18/>

Graz, Austria on September 3rd 2018

Many thanks to Karin Baur (Graz), Kathryn Hess (Lausanne), Elena Resmerita (Klagenfurt), Carola-Bibiane Schönlieb (Cambridge) and Ana Garcia Elsener (Graz) for organising this EWM meeting and hosting the exhibition. It consists of 13 portraits of female mathematicians from 13 different European countries, three of whom Dusanka, Frances and Karin, are here present. The photographs are by Noel Matoff, who also chose the number 13 and Sara Azzali helped me with the interviews, some of which were carried out in the last EWM meeting in Cortona three years ago.

The exhibition, which is now a little more than 2 years old, was born in July 2016 at the ECM held at the technical University in Berlin. It has since then travelled to more than 60 locations in some 15 countries around the world. Some people here, Francesca, Carola, Karin and probably many others, were involved in hosting the exhibition at their home institutions; let me take the opportunity to thank them. Starting from Germany, the exhibition then went to Italy, France, England, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Switzerland, Holland, Norway and beyond European borders, to Australia, Cuba, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Lebanon and Senegal. In its short life, this exhibition has met many faces, as illustrated by the photographs you can see on the website of the exhibition under “Locations”, which document the various venues. After a difficult time during its two years’ gestation in fear of a lack of necessary funding to give it birth, its life has become easier since then. Unfortunately, we have no record of the reactions it has triggered along the way, yet some I can report on since I was present. Let me tell you two anecdotes.

- a young female participant, Dorcas Addo from Ghana at a summer school in M’bour, Senegal coorganised earlier this year by Katrin Wendland who happens to be one of the portrayed mathematicians, asked me whether after the school, she could take Katrin’s portrait back home, only Katrin’s not the other panels.
- a male Italian colleague, Paolo Aschieri at a conference in Beirut who shyly came up to me after the opening, asking me whether he could take the exhibition with him to the next conference in Sofia he was about to attend, after which he had it shown at his home university and his son’s high school in Torino.

Also, some of the debates triggered by the exhibition were astonishing, such as

- in Bogotá, Colombia, where a woman professor of the Universidad Nacional, invited for the opening to talk about women in maths, was strongly criticised by some students (half male half female) among the audience for saying that she

had been successful in her career, and couldn't see any problem for other women do to the same!

- in M'bour, Senegal, where the few young female participants present amongst whom Dorcas, confronted young male participants from the Ivory Coast who were proudly claiming that their women partners were far less educated than them, as it should be, that no way would they marry a woman with the same level of education as theirs!

The exhibition has produced clones along the way which served to extend it by additional panels, in Cambridge with 6 portraits of women scientists from Cambridge, in Kaiserslautern with local female mathematicians, in Mainz with local female physicists, and upcoming in Heidelberg with female computer scientists of the Laureate Forum, but also in Chile with South American female mathematicians, amongst whom Carolina Neira, some of you might know.

Accompanying this exhibition (when I could, often carrying it under my arm) gave me the opportunity to see how it can serve as a tool to trigger discussions around women in maths and to establish a network of "those who once hosted it". I am happy to have met so many enthusiastic hosts for this exhibition and wish it a long life!