# On not making a living, but a life

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The end of my academic career may come as a surprise to some, but I have been writing these reflective notes for five years already. On the one hand, to keep my memories faithful, on the other hand, to share my reasons and decisions, but mostly to satisfy my desire to create. My path to mathematics was never straightforward. Despite some talent as a teenager, I refused to attend schools specialized in math and avoided competitions early on. Around 16, I wanted to become a pianist after only three ridiculous years of training. My parents luckily talked me out of this. But even when I embarked on university in 2004, mathematics was not the first thing on my mind. Misguided by boring school numeracy, I started as a computer scientist and changed to the queen of science in the following term. I neither planned on becoming a mathematician nor on getting a certain job. I was just deeply fascinated and eager to learn. In my spare time, I studied number theory by Hardy–Wright. The proof of the prime number theorem presented an opportunity to get familiar with LaTeX. In 2006, I began to focus on group theory, albeit no such lecture was offered. I did not even think about a Ph.D. until I received an offer shortly after the submission of my diploma thesis in 2008. This was an attractive full-time position (less common back then) for two years and I had no intention to beg for a renewal. As the problem of my thesis turned out to be essentially known, I had to find a variation on my own. Apart from minor difficulties (trying to understand Usami–Puig), the writing process went smoothly so that I submitted after one and a half years (waiting for the examiners' reports was a different story). During this time, the neurodermatitis caused by allergies, from which I suffered since my childhood, became so unbearable that I couldn't sleep, lost interest in social life, and got broken up with my then-girlfriend. That marked the beginning of an ongoing addiction to cortisone.

To cope with it, I developed more and more bizarre routines: I abandoned alcohol, in fact, every beverage but tap water. I turned vegan for a while, stayed vegetarian and sometimes fast. I shower cold exclusively. I wear gloves at night. I get up at 5 am to split the darkness evenly. Every day. Nothing else has shaped my life as an adult more. Don't try to understand my behavior, compassion won't help anyway. There is no logic to illness. All healthy people live alike, but each sick person suffers on one's own. There were some happy times with little pain as in Santa Cruz 2012, but my disease always returned with increasing intensity. I write "my" disease because it became an inseparable

and important part of my personality, which has taught me a lot. I would have been a very different, perhaps more agreeable, but certainly not a better person without it. It forced me to live in the present moment and to keep daily life as simple as possible. I feel sad only in good health, other times I'm existing. I never reached that level of satisfaction that drives people to pursue a career, start a family, build a house, you name it. For me, it's sports and art. As a young adult, I was obsessed with skateboarding, but this became too prone to injuries over the years. After more or less intense periods of gymnastics, juggling and climbing, my next passion and first contact with meditation became long slacklines. When I moved to Kaiserslautern in 2015, I shifted gradually from slacklining to bouldering and eventually to running. The great benefits of heavy sweating on my skin encouraged me to train as often as possible. Being a meritocratic person, I set myself ambitious goals, the 10k under 35 minutes being the ultimate. But I never seek to compete against others. Why spending money to run on a crowded course in unpredictable weather conditions only to win a T-shirt made by children from Bangladesh? My most transcendent moments occur during the 25 lonely laps on the track on the edge of fainting in the brutal summer heat. My life is about turning agony into relief. Time and time again.

At this point, the reasons why I failed to land a permanent position in academia are probably less surprising. Firstly, conferences, networking, moving and traveling in general were and are not first priority to me. Nothing matters without good health. Although I did a postdoc in the US and greatly enjoyed it against my initial resistance, it is already eleven years ago. The clumsy titles I have accumulated meanwhile in Germany — "Privatdozent", "Vertretungsprofessor", "Verwaltungsprofessor" and most recently "außerplanmäßiger Professor" — were a big deal in Noether's times (when universities weren't swimming pools), but are nowadays consolation prizes at best. My basic networking skills earned me Erdős number 2, but this obviously didn't help much either. Fifty years after the last relevant Fields medal, my field of research — representation theory of finite groups — became unpopular, especially in Germany. Perhaps it was my job to keep it alive and to make it famous again. I tell my students that a Ph.D. should be driven by genuine mathematical interest and not by the wish to be called a doctor. Naively, I assumed that this attitude applies to professorships as well. Now in hindsight with present professors in mind, I believe the opposite is true. It needs a big ego to introduce yourself frequently, to insist on the formal "Sie", to interrupt your conversation partners, or to pose in the center of a conference photo. I do not gain much self-esteem by exercising power over people. I'm afraid to end up like the emeriti, who can barely walk, but still make it to the office on Sundays, because they feel important and indispensable. Despite retirement, they get invited and can't say "no" to attract a clueless audience with a poor, unsalaried talk.

Secondly, I'm a mediocre mathematician. Like Czerny's music, my 80ish papers are decent, but unspectacular and will be forgotten soon. Surely some permanent members do a lot worse, but they were certainly lucky at some point. My productivity (and lack of creativity) originates from an interest in the work of my colleagues. I rather prove or disprove their conjectures, instead of introducing my own dubious ideas. Moreover, I

avoid passive entertainment like newspapers, movies or social media. Instead, I rather write, play, record, train, teach, paint or photograph. Finally, I'm not fully committed to serve the rest of my life as a slave of bureaucracy at unattractive places. As an introverted interim professor, I felt the fatigue of nine teaching hours per week. An increasing amount of time is spent on third-party funding proposals since public universities run out of money these days. The remaining time is wasted on pointless evaluation committees caused by first world politics. Peter's principle at best: You end up doing things, you weren't trained for. Frankly speaking, for some applications I felt relieved getting rejected. I tried and failed. There is nothing to regret.

Many young academics complain about the employment situation in Germany, in particular the WissZeitVG (#IchBinHanna). However, the conditions are well-known and haven't changed much in a long time. An academic career is still as risky as a career in professional sports. We are like athletes, who didn't make it to the Olympics. There is always someone better than you and it is silly to complain about that. The university system is working as long as enough young scholars (often from abroad) are willing to accept short-term contracts. I happily paid that price and spent 15 fantastic years in freedom and solitude, visiting marvelous places like San Francisco and Valencia. In fact, I got further temporary offers, but it feels wrong to walk the dead end to the death. Compared with other countries (except France), the strategy to put academics on fire with non-permanent positions, does pay off to some extent, but mostly research-wise. It goes without saying that this doesn't suit everyone. At these uncertain times, we should appreciate that the government still spends tax money on research in pure mathematics without much benefit to society (thank you, DFG!). There were times when Hardy, the godfather of Ramanujan, apologized on 90 pages about exactly this. The only criticism I like to make is on the archaic hiring process in Germany. Applications get reviewed and ranked by voluntary external professors. The top-tier candidates often apply only to negotiate their current salaries. Meanwhile, vacant positions are filled temporarily (sometimes for only four months) with desperate lecturers, who commute from other places and know little about the student body. The full professors on the other hand get away with their specialized courses for a handful of students. Good teaching cannot be provided under these circumstances. It takes at least a full year and sometimes more than two to fill a professor position eventually. This is much more efficient in other countries, but they suffer for different reasons (e. g. higher education strikes in the UK).

In the past, I enjoyed reading biographies of mathematicians, who left their field to work on more important matters: Alan Turing, John von Neumann, Claude Shannon and most arguably Alexander Grothendieck. In the face of war and global warming, Grothendieck's effort to establish a movement of peace and sustainability is now more urgent than ever. We shouldn't keep living in our bubbles searching for the truth of Alperin's conjecture. After all, it's merely, because it's there!