
Otto Neugebauer

1899–1990

Otto Neugebauer (26 May 1899 – 19 February 1990) was an eminent historian of ancient and mediaeval mathematics and astronomy. However, readers of *Notices* will be most interested in his role in the creation and development of *Mathematical Reviews* (MR).



The *Jahrbuch über die Fortschritte der Mathematik* was founded in 1871; it undertook to publish a single volume containing reviews of all the mathematics published in a given year. By the 1920s the *Jahrbuch* was failing to cope with the information explosion in mathematics, which was then amounting to some 2000 articles a year (less than what *Mathematical Reviews* publishes each month nowadays!) It was Neugebauer who persuaded Springer-Verlag to add mathematics to its abstracting journals in other sciences, with the plan of reviewing articles as rapidly as possible, without regard to their sequence; the first issue of the *Zentralblatt für Mathematik* appeared in 1931, with Neugebauer as editor. It

rapidly became an essential reference for every working mathematician. Neugebauer opposed the Nazis and was forced out of his academic position in Göttingen. In 1933 he emigrated to Denmark, and in 1934 became a Professor of Mathematics there, continuing to edit the *Zentralblatt* until 1938, when Springer-Verlag, under pressure from the German government, asked him to edit it in accordance with Nazi principles. This led to his resignation (along with most of his editorial board), and he destroyed his files.

It had become clear that the mathematical community could no longer function without a reliable abstracting service, and *Mathematical Reviews* was established in Providence, where Neugebauer had become Professor of Mathematics in 1939 (he was to become Professor of the History of Mathematics in 1947) at Brown University. The original editorial board of MR consisted of Neugebauer, Tamarkin and Veblen, but most of the actual work was done by Neugebauer himself; soon, however, there was an assistant editor; and, from 1945 onward, a full-time executive editor. The character of MR was established by Neugebauer. Originally the languages for reviews were English, French, German and Italian, the languages of the International Congress. However, letters from MR were always written in English (as Neugebauer explained on one occasion, because English was the language of his secretary). Neugebauer always insisted that the length of the review was not intended to be directly proportional to the importance of the paper; indeed, a bad paper needed to have a review sufficiently detailed so that nobody needed to look at the paper itself, whereas a really important paper needed only to be called to the world's attention.

Over the years, Neugebauer received many awards, but the one that gave him the most pleasure, he said, was the Award for Distinguished Service to Mathematics, from the Mathematical Association of America, presented to him in 1979, principally for his founding and editing of the *Zentralblatt* and MR.

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