

Vale József Pelikán



Born Budapest 26 October 1947

Died Budapest 20 January 2023

We are saddened to hear of the passing of Erdős-prize winner József Pelikán.

József was a legendary figure in the Mathematics Competition community, known especially for his decades-long involvement with the International Mathematical Olympiad. As a student, he was one of the most successful contestants in IMO history, winning three gold medals and a silver, along with two special prizes and one perfect score. He worked as an organizer at the IMO 1982 in Hungary, and was Leader of the Hungarian team 31 times, up until 2019. He was a member of the IMO Advisory Board for many years, and its chair for two periods. Also, his polyglot abilities were incredible. He was without peer in his ability to compare language versions of the IMO papers, and his comments on the translations were a special asset at the IMO for many years.

In his professional life, he was a Professor of Mathematics in the Department of Algebra and Number Theory at Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary. He was active both in mathematical research and teaching, as well as finding the time to work on several important books, like the famous book on Discrete Mathematics he co-authored with Laszlo Lovasz and Katalin Vesztergombi. His contributions were widely recognized, and in 2009, he was honored with the Bolyai award.

For twenty years, he was a well-known and respected competitor in the Bridge world, bringing the depth of his abstract insights to the game.

Of course, from the point of view of the WFNMC, it is the breadth of his contributions to the competition world that really stand out. Beside the IMO, he was very active in the Hungarian scene. He was a member of the contest committee of the prestigious Kürschák Competition, and worked there for more than three decades. In the early days of the Kangaroo competition in Hungary, he worked for several years in helping to organize and implement the competition, and he was a very active participant in the international problem development meetings of the AKSF (Association Kangourou sans Frontières) in the early formative years of the association.

My own favorite memory of József dates back to the WFNMC conference in Cambridge in 2006. We were sitting at dinner one evening, and my then-teenage daughter Lisa had just solved a wooden gopher puzzle we had bought at a local handicraft market. József decided to try his hand at solving it as well, and played around with fitting the pieces together for a while. He couldn't immediately come up with the solution, and as far as he was concerned, this would not do. He memorized the shapes of the pieces and retired to his room for the night. The next morning, he showed up at breakfast and asked for the puzzle. After I had brought it, he put the pieces together immediately. He had spent quite a bit of time during the night solving the puzzle in his head. This was an especially impressive example of his dedication to the solving of a problem once it had caught his attention!

József will be greatly missed by the entire mathematics competition community.

Robert Geretschläger