

REES, Mina S. August 2, 1902–October 25, 1997.

HUNTER COLLEGE (BA 1923), COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY (TEACHERS COLLEGE) (MA 1925), UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO (PhD 1931).

Mina Spiegel Rees was the youngest of two daughters and three sons of Alice Louise (Stackhouse) (b. 1870) and Moses Rees (b. 1858). Her mother was born in England and immigrated to the United States in 1883, and her father was born in New York of German parents; they married in about 1892. The older children were Elsa I. (1893–1975), Albert L. (1894–1993), Clyde Harvey (1896–1967), and Clarence Eugene (1898–1966). Mina Rees was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but the family moved to New York when she was a baby, and her early schooling was in the New York City public schools.

After graduating from Hunter College High School as valedictorian of her class in 1919, Mina Rees attended Hunter College where she was a mathematics major and very active in governance. She was president of her freshman and sophomore classes and, during her senior year, of the Student Self Governance Association. During her junior year she served as editor-in-chief of the Hunter College yearbook, the *Wistarion*. Rees graduated summa cum laude in 1923 and was awarded an “H” pin as one of the seniors who “distinguished [her]self by signal service to Hunter” during her four years at college.

After her graduation from Hunter, Rees was offered, but refused, a job at the college by the then chair Emma Requa, whose only degree was an 1898 BA from Hunter. Rees related in 1969: “I had formed a firm opinion when I was an undergraduate that this was a bad mistake that the College was making, employing people who had just graduated. I felt that the standards of the College were not high enough and that people should be better educated before they . . . became teachers there. So, I said I could not under any circumstances, teach at the College because I wasn’t [well enough educated].” Rees also said that Requa “was appalled at anything like this, so she got me a job at Hunter High School” (Interview by Merzbach, 2). Rees was an assistant teacher at the high school and attended Columbia University as a full-time graduate student. She recalled later that, “when I had taken four of their six-credit graduate courses in mathematics and was beginning to think about a thesis, the word was conveyed to me – no official ever told me this, but I learned – that the Columbia mathematics department was really not interested in having women candidates for Ph.D.’s. . . . That was the only episode that raised a question about the appropriateness of mathematics as a field for women before I had my Ph.D. It was a really traumatic affair for me” (Dana and Hilton, “Mina Rees,” 258). Rees’s perception is backed up by the fact that the department granted only one PhD to a woman, [Edna E. Kramer](#), between 1923 and 1939. Kramer, who had graduated from Hunter in 1922, received her degree from Columbia in 1930.

After she received her master’s degree from Teachers College of Columbia University in 1925, Rees was hired as instructor of mathematics at Hunter College. She saved her money and in 1929 took a leave of absence from Hunter to enroll at the University of Chicago. She chose Chicago because she wanted to study with Leonard Eugene Dickson, whose 1923 *Algebras and Their Arithmetics* she had studied at Columbia. Unfortunately, when she arrived at Chicago, Dickson’s attention had turned to number theory, so she referred later to her having been “virtually self-educated” (Interview by Merzbach, 3). On the other hand, Rees’s arrival in

Chicago came at an opportune time for her; within a month she represented the Hunter mathematics department at the inauguration of the university's new president and as such was one of the guests of honor at a dinner given by the Chicago department. Rees reported later that soon after that dinner Dickson asked her to write her dissertation with him. She also reported that Dickson believed that, as a mathematician, she probably was on a par with C. C. MacDuffee. However, she did not pursue a research career after her degree because, upon reviewing Oskar Perron's *Algebra* in 1933, she did not feel that she was educated properly in the new Noetherian algebra.

In 1931 Rees completed her dissertation on certain kinds of division algebras, having had a fellowship her last year at Chicago. After receiving her degree in 1931 Rees returned to Hunter College as instructor. She was assistant professor 1932–40 and became associate professor in 1940. In 1943 she took a leave of absence to work for the newly established Applied Mathematics Panel (AMP) of the National Defense Research Committee. She remained officially on leave until 1950.

Rees described the work of the AMP as “an attempt to enlist the assistance of civilian scientists outside the military to help the military ... with weaponry and specific work oriented toward winning the war...” (Interview by Merzbach, 5). She served as a technical aide and executive assistant to Warren Weaver, chief of the AMP. Rees was with the AMP until 1946, when she went to Washington, D.C., to work for the Office of Naval Research (ONR). At ONR she was head of the mathematics branch 1946–49, director of the mathematical sciences division 1949–52, and deputy science director 1952–53. In 1990 a statistician referred to Rees as “the angel of mathematics” at ONR (Mood, “Miscellaneous reminiscences,” 39).

The significance of her role during and just after the war was recognized in a resolution adopted by the council of the AMS at its annual meeting in December 1953. It reads in part:

The very striking and brilliant contributions made by pure (non-military, non-applied) science, not least of these by mathematics, to the winning of World War II is well known. It was clearly seen by the government and those responsible for the armed services that a large scale fostering by the U.S. government of fundamental research, the basis of all research, was unavoidable. . . . Needless to say as the purest of all sciences, mathematical research might well have lagged behind in such an undertaking. That nothing of the sort happened is beyond any doubt traceable to one person—Mina Rees. Under her guidance, basic research in general, and especially in mathematics, received the most intelligent and wholehearted support. No greater wisdom and foresight could have been displayed and the whole postwar development of mathematical research in the United States owes an immeasurable debt to the pioneer work of the Office of Naval Research and to the alert, vigorous and farsighted policy conducted by Miss Rees. The influence of these policies has been such that it vitally affected later developments: the activities of Air Force and Ordinance research, the National Science Foundation itself. It is well known that in these more recent organizations Mina Rees was constantly appealed to for counsel and guidance. (*Bull. Amer. Math. Soc.* 60 (1954): 134)

Although the Institute for Mathematical Statistics adopted a similar resolution, in 1987 Albert H. Bowker, a statistician from Stanford University who had been chancellor of the City University of New York 1961–72, said that he had “always thought that Mina and ONR have not been given enough credit for the development of mathematical statistics in this country” (Olkin, 475). In 1989 Rees was one of four mathematicians from the ONR awarded the IEEE Computer Society Pioneer Award.

Mina Rees returned to Hunter College as professor of mathematics and dean of the faculty in 1953 and became head of a new Office of Institutional Research there the following year. On June 24, 1955, she married Leopold Brahdy, a physician whom she had known for many years. Brahdy was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1892 and immigrated with his family to the United States when he was six. He later chaired the Metropolitan New York Section of the History of Science Society. Brahdy died in 1977.

Rees remained as professor and dean until 1961 when the City University of New York was founded, and she became professor and dean of graduate studies at CUNY. In the latter position she was instrumental in shaping the nature of graduate studies at CUNY. She was provost of the graduate division 1968–69 and was president of the Graduate School from 1969 until her retirement as president emeritus in 1972. She wrote a report, “The first ten years of the Graduate School, The City University of New York,” the year she retired.

Rees was interested in mathematics education and wrote several articles for the NCTM journal *Mathematics Teacher*. During the 1960s she served on several advisory committees for educational projects including one formed by the Conference Board of the Mathematical Sciences for a course on contemporary mathematics on the NBC program *Continental Classroom*. She was also a member of the consultants bureau of the MAA Committee on the Undergraduate Program in Mathematics in 1961 and served on the steering committee for a study of mathematics curriculum supported by an NSF grant and reported on at the Cambridge Conference on School Mathematics in 1963.

Starting in the 1950s, Rees served in a number of important positions in scientific organizations. Especially noteworthy were her positions in 1964–70 on the National Science Board, to which she was appointed by President Lyndon Johnson, and within the AAAS, where she became the first woman president in 1971. Also in the AAAS, where she was a fellow, she served as vice president 1953–54, chairman of Section A 1953–54, member of the board of directors 1957–60, and chairman of the board 1972. Her positions within the ACM included her appointment to the original executive council 1947–48 and her election to the executive council 1948–50. For the AMS she was on the nominating committee 1952 and was a trustee 1955–59. In the MAA she was vice president 1963–64, was vice chairman 1955 and chairman 1956 of the New York Metropolitan Section, and was on or served as chairman of numerous committees; these included the committee on World War II History 1981–83. For SIAM she was councillor 1953–56, on the committee on visiting lecturers 1959–60, representative on the AAAS council 1958–61, and on the board of directors of the SIAM Institute for Mathematics and Society. She was councillor 1957–60 for the New York Academy of Sciences. She also served as a member of the executive committee of the American Conference of Academic Deans 1960–62. She chaired a panel on the level and forms of support in the mathematical

sciences for a report issued in 1968 by the Committee on Support of Research in the Mathematical Sciences (COSRIMS) of the National Research Council for the Committee on Science and Public Policy of the National Academy of Sciences. In addition to her many posts, she often chaired sessions at meetings, symposia, and conferences and also gave a number of banquet addresses.

Publications by and about Rees are so numerous that we have not attempted to list them all. Two references to Rees, the 1962 article in the *Monthly* and the 1987 article by Phyllis Fox in *Women of Mathematics: A Bibliobibliographic Sourcebook*, list several additional reports or articles by Rees that we have not included; Fox also lists several references to Rees that do not appear below.

Among Rees's many honors are at least eighteen honorary degrees from US colleges and universities; the King's Medal for Service in the Cause of Freedom "in recognition of valuable services rendered to the Allied war effort" 1948 (*Bull. Amer. Math. Soc.* 54 (1948): 493); the President's Certificate of Merit 1948; MAA's first award for service to mathematics 1962; Hunter College High School's first distinguished graduate 1965; AAUW achievement award 1965; a AAAS Symposium to Honor Mina Rees, January 1982; and the Public Welfare Medal, National Academy of Sciences, "for her contributions to the scientific enterprise, especially in mathematics, astronomy and computer science, from wartime, through the transition from war to peace, and continuing today" April 25, 1983 (NAS Archives). The library at the Graduate School and University Center of CUNY was dedicated as the Mina Rees Library in 1985. In 1970 she was also featured in *Vogue* magazine as one of nine women described as "Liberated. All Liberated."

Rees had broad cultural interests that included music, dance, and literature. It was noted in her 1985 profile in *Mathematical People* that she was "an accomplished painter ... [who] for a time ... studied in Mexico every year" (p. 257). Later she went to Maine in summers and painted there. She was a frequent traveler abroad and made trips to South America and Europe. She was a member of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in Manhattan for many years.

Mina Rees died at the Mary Manning Walsh Home in Manhattan a few months after her ninety-fifth birthday. She was survived by a niece, a great-niece, and grand-nephews. She left \$1.7 million to the CUNY Graduate Center to establish a fellowship and to endow a chair in mathematics. At the CUNY Graduate Center the Mina Rees Dissertation Fellowships in the Sciences are awarded annually. In addition, at least one Mina S. Rees Graduate Scholarship in Sciences and Mathematics is awarded annually to students in, or about to enroll in, a PhD program at CUNY. She is the subject of two doctoral dissertations.

Organizational affiliations: AMS, MAA, SIAM, AAAS (fellow), Phi Beta Kappa, Sigma Xi, Pi Mu Epsilon.

Dissertation:

1931 Division algebras associated with an equation whose group has four generators. PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, directed by Leonard Eugene Dickson. Private edition, 1932, reprinted from *Amer. J. Math.* 54:51–65.

Selected publications:

1932 Division algebras associated with an equation whose group has four generators. *Amer. J. Math.* 54:51–65. Published version of PhD dissertation. Reviews: *JFM* 58.0141.04 (W. Burau); *Zbl* 003.24501 (H. Brandt).

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1935 Review of *Triumph der Mathematik*, by H. Dörrie. *Scripta Math.* 3:345–46.

- 1936** Review of *The Search for Truth*, by E. T. Bell. *Scripta Math.* 4:79–80.
- 1940a** Lao Genevra Simons. *Scripta Math.* 7:7–8.
- 1940b** Review of *A Semicentennial History of the American Mathematical Society, 1888–1938*, by R. C. Archibald, and *Semicentennial Addresses*. *Scripta Math.* 7:121–25.
- 1941** Review of *Trigonometry*, rev. ed., by N. J. Lennes and A. S. Merrill. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 48:473.
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- 1951** with H. W. Brinkmann, Z. I. Mosesson, S. A. Schelkunoff, and S. S. Wilks. Professional opportunities in mathematics. A report for undergraduate students of mathematics. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 58:1–24.
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- 1953b** Modern mathematics and the gifted student. *Math. Teacher* 46:401–406.
- 1953c** Preface. In *Higher Transcendental Functions, Vol. I* by A. Erdélyi, W. Magnus, F. Oberhettinger, and F. G. Tricomi, ix–x. McGraw Hill. Review of book: *Bull. Amer. Math. Soc.* 60:405–8 (G. Szegő). Reprint: 1981. Melbourne, Fla.: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co.
- 1954a** Computers: 1954. *Sci. Monthly* 79:118–24.
- 1954b** Mathematics and federal support. *Science* n.s. 119:3A.
- 1954c** Review of *An American in Europe: The Life of Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford*, by E. Larsen. *Sci. Monthly* 79:189.
- 1955a** Digital computers. *Amer. Math. Monthly* 62:414–23. Review: *Zbl* 64.38001 (A. Speiser).
- 1955b** New frontiers for mathematicians. *Pi Mu Epsilon J.* 2:122–27.
- 1955c** Review of *Advanced Mathematics for Engineers*, by H. W. Reddick and F. H. Miller. *Science* n.s. 122:204.
- 1955d** Review of *Numerical Methods*, by A. D. Booth. *Science* n.s. 122:422.
- 1955e** Review of *Transactions of the Symposium on Computing, Mechanics, Statistics and Partial Differential Equations. Held at the University of Chicago 29–30 Apr. 1954. Vol. II, Symposium on Applied Mathematics*, by F. E. Grubbs, F. J. Murray, and J. J. Stoker. *Science* n.s. 122:697.
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1977b Mathematics and the government: The post-war years as augury of the future. In *The Bicentennial Tribute to American Mathematics*, ed. D. Tarwater, 101–16. Reviews of book: *Amer. Math. Monthly* 88:770–71 (G. H. Moore); *Hist. Math.* 6:101 #982 (A. C. Lewis); *Math. Gaz.* 63:203–5. Presented to the MAA, San Antonio, TX, 26 Jan 1976.

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Mathematicians in industry and government. Presented by title to the MAA, University Park, PA, 27 Aug 1957.

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