

Confluences of agendas: Emigrant mathematicians in transit in Denmark, 1933–1945

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Available online 28 December 2013

Abstract

The present paper analyses the confluence of agendas held by Danish mathematicians and German refugees from Nazi oppression as they unfolded and shaped the mathematical milieu in Copenhagen during the 1930s. It does so by outlining the initiatives to aid emigrant intellectuals in Denmark and contextualises the few mathematicians who would be aided. For most of those, Denmark would be only a transit on the route to more permanent immigration, mainly in the US. Thus, their time in Copenhagen would exert only temporary influence over Danish mathematics; but as it will be argued, the impacts of their transit would be more durable both for the emigrants and for the Danish mathematical milieu. It is thus argued that the influx of emigrant mathematicians helped develop the institutional conditions of mathematics in Copenhagen in important ways that simultaneously bolstered the international outlook of Danish mathematicians. These confluences of agendas became particularly important for Danish mathematics after the war, when the networks developed during the 1930s could be drawn upon.

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Resumé

Efter nazisternes magtovertagelse i 1933 måtte en række tyske matematikere emigrere, og nogle af dem kom til Danmark for kortere eller længere tid. Denne artikel analyserer de danske matematikeres og de tyske emigranternes samspillende agendaer, som formede dansk matematik, især i København, i løbet af 1930'erne. Først gives et vue over de initiativer, som igangsattes for at hjælpe emigrerende "åndsarbejdere" i Danmark, og det beskrives, hvordan de få matematikere iblandt dem blev hjulpet. For de fleste af disse var Danmark blot et transit på vejen til mere permanent udvandring til især USA. Derfor fik deres ophold i København kun midlertidig direkte indflydelse på det danske matematiske miljø, men som det bliver diskuteret i artiklen, havde deres transit alligevel længererækkende konsekvenser både for emigranterne og for dansk matematik. Tilstedeværelsen af emigranterne var især med til at udforme det nybyggede Matematiske Institut i København og bidrog i særdeleshed til at udbygge dansk matematiks internationale udsyn og profil. Disse samspillende agendaer skulle vise sig væsentlige for danske matematikere i efterkrigstiden, hvor de kunne trække på netværk, som var dannet i 1930'erne.

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MSC: 01A60; 01A80

Keywords: Emigrants; Copenhagen; Rask-Ørsted Fondet; Institutionalisation

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1. Introduction: Emigrant mathematicians in transit in Denmark

In the midst of the dire situation for Jewish and left-wing mathematicians in Germany after Adolf Hitler's (1889–1945) ascent to power in the spring of 1933, the Danish mathematical milieu provided a refuge for a few — at least temporarily. The purpose of the present paper is to analyse the confluences of agendas among the Danish and emigrant mathematicians at a time, when institutions and individuals were in need of manoeuvring in a politically charged atmosphere. In part, the paper will outline the efforts made by Danish mathematicians to aid their colleagues in need; in part, it will provide details about the refugees who found some form of support from Denmark; and in part, it will address the impacts exerted by refugee mathematicians on mathematics in Denmark during the short period when they stayed there. Thus, this article addresses issues involved with the temporary transit of German emigrant mathematicians in a small mathematical milieu.

Those German-speaking mathematicians — about a dozen of them — who show up as emigrants in the Danish records form a small, yet still heterogeneous set. They were young, often single men trained in mathematics at some of Europe's greatest institutions. They had left Germany as they feared persecution — yet, their conflicts with the Nazis were as varied as that of any other group of Nazi refugees: Some were left-wing opponents of the regime, others fled for political reasons after internal quarrels within the Nazi structure. Yet, the majority fled Germany because they were Jewish or because they otherwise found it impossible (morally or physically) to perform their jobs and maintain a livelihood in Germany after 1933.

The choice of Denmark as a destination after leaving Germany was likewise a multi-faceted matter for most emigrants. For some, the border with Denmark was the closest one — either over land or by ship. For most emigrants, the emigration to Denmark was soon — if not before they actually left Germany — to become only a first step towards further re-migration — if they were not rejected outright at the border and sent back to Germany. For the intellectuals, in particular, Denmark would not seem to offer much hope of attractive permanent occupation — and many of them already had their eyes set on Britain, South America or, in particular, the US. Thus, Denmark came to serve as a transit for emigrants relieved to find respite for the dire situation in Germany yet eager to find a new life, particularly at the other side of the Atlantic.

The Danish transit for German emigrant mathematicians thus opens new sets of historiographical challenges and questions: The relevant emigrants were few in number, and many of them left little immediate impact on the Danish mathematical scene. Yet, some of them did stay for longer — some of them permanently — and more did leave their mark on Danish mathematics and were reciprocally marked by their experiences in their first haven after emigration. Thus, after describing the Danish mathematical and political context of the 1930s and providing an overview of the emigration, their transits in Denmark will here be studied in the following respects:

1. The motivations and aims of the Danish mathematicians were also mixed — and their ability to bring them into reality proved to depend on a confluence of agendas held by prominent individuals, political and scientific institutions, and of course the emigrants. What kind of aid was offered by Danish mathematicians to their German colleagues, and how was support solicited, in particular from the major sponsor, Rask-Ørsted Fondet? This captures the aspect as seen from the Danish mathematical community.
2. The confluence of agendas did not stop at the border when the emigrants entered Danish territory; instead, they were actively engaged with some important (also in the longer term) institutional and scientific developments in Danish mathematics. What immediate impact did the German-speaking emigrants have on Danish mathematics during the period? Two aspects stand out: the institutional side of building and running the Department of Mathematics at Copenhagen University and in terms of research interests and collaborations that would eventually shape aspects of Danish academic mathematical profile.

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