

Math of the World: The Paul Erdős Song

words by John O. Kiltinen, © 2009

(sung to the tune of “Maailman Matti,” a Finnish dancing and marching tune)

Oh my name is Paul Erdős, yes it is, it is,
And my life's greatest passion is math,
I buzz 'round the world going here and there,
Hardly stopping to take a bath.
I've a home off in Budapest,
Hardly there, much prefer the West,
::I just travel you see here and there 'cause I'm free,
Showing up where Ron tells me to be.::

If you want me to visit have a talk with Ron,
Soonest slot he'll fill in 'fore your eyes,
I will solve all your problems save the toughest ones,
For those I will offer a prize.
We'll churn out a paper or two,
Fueled by coffee, my favorite brew,
::If we're lucky we'll hook, yes by hook or crook,
The proof from God's big fat book.::

I have often said that a belief in God,
Is not needed for the perfect proof,
But the Book, you just need to have belief in it,
If a proof's not in there, it's a spoof.
I've got my own language, it's said,
When you quit doing math you are dead,
::Hurraa hurraa hoi, minun lauluni soi,
Hurraa maailman matikka, oi.::

“*Maailman Matti*” (Matt of the World) is a popular Finnish dancing and marching song. We have used this tune for a song about Paul Erdős because of two things. First, one could take “matti” as a Finnish abbreviation for mathematics like “math” is a shortened form of this longer word in English. (The actual Finnish word is *matikka*, which we have used in the last line.) Second, Paul Erdős was a vagabond just as the Matt of the original song was. Since Paul Erdős travelled around the globe churning out mathematics here and there, his math could truly be classified as “math of the world,” or as one would say this in Finnish, “maailman matikka.”

Paul Erdős (1913-1996) was a very prolific Hungarian mathematician. He never had a regular academic post. Instead he travelled from here to there collaborating with hundreds of others on their problems. He followed a calendar kept for him by American mathematician, Ronald Graham, who is the Ron mentioned in the song. He was a co-author of hundreds of papers, mostly with 511 co-authors.

The final two lines are in Finnish and patterned closely after the original words. In fact, the second to the last line is from the original song. The word “hurraa” means “hurray” or “hurrah.” The word “hoi” is a filler. It is about as common in Finnish songs as “tra la la” is in English songs. “Minun lauluni soi” translates as “my song resounds.” The final line translates as “hurray for world math,” with the final “oi” being another Finnish filler added for the sake of the rhyme and rhythm.

The double colons are used here, as they are in many Finnish songs, to indicate that a section should be repeated.