

PREPARATION OF THE FIRST ECM IN PARIS (1992)

by Max Karoubiⁱ

This is a short history of the creation of the first ECM (European Congress of Mathematics) in Paris. Its preparation, not so well known, is linked with the EMS and has therefore some historical value for mathematicians. I should say that the idea of an ECM in European cities every four years was not immediately accepted, even in France, the first country to be concerned. It took some time for this idea to emerge as one of the main activities of the EMS.

The idea of the first ECM originated from the political changes in Europe at the end of the 80's, shortly before the fall of most communist regimes in Eastern countries. For scientists, particularly mathematicians, the ECM was an opportunity to increase the relations between all countries in Europe.

I first discussed about this project with Rudolf Rentschler during the year 1989. Rudolf, a mathematician of both German and French cultures, was very enthusiastic. At that time, computers became familiar to most mathematicians. We used this facility to write many letters, seeking advice and opinions in the mathematical community about the project. As an example, here is a letter sent to Sir Michael Atiyah on 1st March 1989:

Dear Professor Atiyah,

The French Mathematical Society is considering the organization of a European Congress of Mathematicians every four years, starting in 1992. Its purpose would be the exchange of information and the organization of survey talks in various fields of Mathematics.

Although we are for the time being in a very preliminary stage, we already have a scientific committee in France which consists of Professors A. Connes, J. Tits and myself.

Before developing this idea any further, we would like to collect your advice and suggestions and to know if you are willing to take part in such a project. We all know that you want to promote European mathematics and we hope that this project will fit with your ideas.

We suggest Paris for the first meeting place in 1992, but it is obvious to us that the congress should be organized in a different European country every four years.

Atiyah's answer was very encouraging. The French Mathematical Society (SMF) is mentioned marginally in this letter ; however, the Society was very pessimistic about the feasibility of the project. We were not discouraged by this negative attitude for two main reasons:

- 1) All letters sent to European mathematical societies in August 1989 received very positive reactions, as in Atiyah's answer (with only two exceptions)
- 2) We started to seek various financial supports. Surprisingly, we very soon collected substantial amounts from the European Commission and French institutions like the Ministry of Education and the CNRS. The equivalent of 300 000 Euros were already promised to us at the end of 1990.

In order to get more support from France, we created an "Association" of mathematicians, under French law. The founder members were J. Dixmier, N. El Karoui, R. Rentschler, M. Waldschmidt and myself. This was de facto the first organization committee (OC) of the Congress. More French mathematicians joined the OC in the following months: Eva Bayer, Y. Maday, M. Andler, P.-L. Lions ...

In this OC, we discussed the format of the Congress in order not to duplicate the ICM. One important feature borrowed from previous meetings was to planning "round tables" within the Congress about the interaction of mathematics with society. This feature was very important to secure funds from various institutions. sensitive to social aspects of Mathematics. Indeed we got various political supports :

- 1) The French President François Mitterrand was invited to the opening ceremony and he answered positively¹
- 2) The Mayor of Paris at the time, Jacques Chirac, agreed to give ten prizes to young European mathematicians.

These prizes, which were a second innovation in our project, initiated by R. Rentschler and the author, were not supposed to compete with the Fields medals. First by their number and secondly by the age of the awardees (around 30).

Since the SMF was reluctant to act as the chief organizer of the Congress, we sought instead the support of the EMS. This was done at the foundation meeting of the Society in Madralin, in November 1990, under the leadership of Friedrich Hirzebruch. As President to be, he was of course made aware of this opportunity through a letter we sent him in August 1989

¹ Unfortunately, it happened that the Congress was scheduled at the same time as a G7 meeting. The congress was finally attended by H. Curien and V. Courtillot, as official representatives.

Dear Prof. Hirzebruch,

You will find enclosed a more detailed project for the European Congress of Mathematicians which our Mathematical Society is organizing for the year 1992 (cf. our letter of February 25 this year).

It is important that the European Mathematical Societies participate in the creative process since this Congress will take place in a different European country every 4 years : 1992, 1996, 2000, ...

In order to go further, we are now collecting your ideas and criticisms. At the same time, we are acting in the direction of political authorities in Europe in order to get support and funds. We have already the support of the General Director of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique / French National Center of Scientific Research). Hoping to hear from you soon,

Sincerely Yours,

Max Karoubi Rudolf Rentschler

(for the organization committee)

After this meeting, the organization committee (OC) worked quite hard to secure the venue of the first ECM in Paris, in close relation with the EMS. The scientific committee was enlarged under the leadership of Sir Michael Atiyah and, later on, of Hans Follmer, and started working. The funds were progressively secured. The OC was more structured, with much secretary help from L. Barenghi of our mathematical Institute in Jussieu.

At last, in April 1991, the SMF and SMAI (Société de Mathématiques Appliquées et Industrielles) became interested in the preparation of the Congress, as we asked at the beginning of the process. Unfortunately, serious tensions emerged about the format of the Congress and a new OC was nominated in June 1991, under the leadership of Fulbert Mignot and François Murat. During these three months of uncertainty, Henri Cartan and Friedrich Hirzebruch played an important role. Their European vision and political wisdom were essential in saving the idea of the Congress, despite opposition from many.

To conclude this short history of the preparation of the first ECM (which was greatly advanced in Spring 1991, as we can see), I should mention the difficult task of the new OC who had to continue the work done during the preparation, under the close supervision of the SMF and SMAI. This second phase of the preparation is sketched in another paper of the Newsletter, written by Mireille Chaleyat-Morel and Michèle Chouhan, with "journalistic eyes".

Finally, at the time of the first Congress, the tradition of the ECM was firmly established. During the Paris Congress, Budapest and Barcelona were already candidates for the years 1996 and 2000. Other European cities were involved afterwards. At the time of writing, the eight ECM is planned in Portoroz (Slovenia) for the year 2020, as was envisioned by the pioneering work of the first organizers.

Historical sources:

- 1) Speeches at the opening ceremony of the Paris Congress, especially those of Henri Cartan and Friedrich Hirzebruch. Available at Birkhauser
- 2) History of the EMS, written by David A.R. Wallace, available at the Web site <http://www.euro-math-soc.eu/history-european-mathematical-society>
- 3) Various archives of the ECM, available on <https://webusers.imj-prg.fr/~max.karoubi/ECMdocuments.html>

ⁱ Max Karoubi is Professor Emeritus at the University of Paris VII - Denis Diderot. He was the Founder of the ECM, Président of the first Organizing Committee (1990 and 1991) and President of the Prize Committee of the Paris Congress.