

A Tribute to Henri Cartan

This collection of articles paying tribute to the mathematician Henri Cartan was assembled and edited by Pierre Cartier, IHÉS, and Luc Illusie, Université Paris-Sud 11, in consultation with Jean-Pierre Serre, Collège de France. The collection begins with the present introductory article, which provides an overview of Cartan's work and a short contribution by Michael Atiyah. This overview is followed by three additional articles, each of which focuses on a particular aspect of Cartan's rich life.

—Steven G. Krantz

Jean-Pierre Serre

Henri Cartan
8 July 1904–13 August 2008

Henri Cartan was, for many of the younger generation, the symbol of the resurgence of French mathematics after World War II. He died in 2008 at the age of 104 years.

Personal Life

Henri was the eldest son of the mathematician Élie Cartan (1869–1951), born in Dolomieu (Isère), and of his wife Marie-Louise Bianconi, of Corsican origin.

Born in Nancy in 1904, he entered the École Normale Supérieure (ENS, 45 rue d'Ulm) in 1923. It was there that he forged the friendships with mathematicians who were to play a major role in his life, beginning with André Weil, who had entered the ENS a year before; others included Jean Dieudonné, Jean Delsarte, René de Possel, and Charles Ehresmann. He left the ENS in 1926, supported by a grant until the completion of his thesis in 1928, and briefly became a teacher at the Lycée Malherbe de Caen. He was then appointed to positions at the University of Lille and subsequently the University of Strasbourg, where he taught from 1931 to 1939. The year 1935 was a particular high point of both his professional and his personal life: with his friends Weil, Dieudonné, de Possel, and others, he founded the Bourbaki group, which he left only at the statutory age of fifty years; and he married the young and charming Nicole Weiss, daughter of one of his physics colleagues at Strasbourg University.

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Jean-Pierre Serre is professor emeritus at the Collège de France. His email address is serre@noos.fr.

This happy marriage, which lasted until his death (followed, a few months later, by that of his wife), produced five children: Jean, Françoise, Étienne, Mireille, and Suzanne.

In September 1939, at the beginning of the war, he moved to Clermont-Ferrand, where the University of Strasbourg had been evacuated. A year later he got a chair at the Sorbonne, where he was given the task of teaching the students of the ENS. This was a providential choice that allowed the “normaliens” (and many others) to benefit for more than twenty-five years (1940–1965) from his courses and seminars. In fact there was a two-year interruption when he returned to Strasbourg from 1945 to 1947—alas for me, because I was then a student at the ENS and could not make his acquaintance until my final year.

He left the ENS in 1965 and, a few years later, to escape the internal disputes between the component parts (Paris VI and Paris VII) of the former Sorbonne, he accepted a chair at Orsay, where he taught until his retirement in 1975. A lecture theatre in the mathematics building has recently been named after him.

Further details on the life of Henri Cartan can be found in two interviews (Schmidt 1990, Jackson 1999).

Mathematical Work

Henri Cartan worked on many subjects but there was one to which he was particularly attached, and that was the theory of functions of several complex variables (which later became the theory of complex varieties and also “analytic geometry”). I will begin with this topic.

His thesis ([Oe], no. 3)¹ dealt with analytic functions of one variable, one of the most popular topics of the period in France. Cartan continued the work of André Bloch and Rolf Nevanlinna,

¹References in this form refer to the bibliography at the end of the text.

