

WORLD FEDERATION OF NATIONAL MATHEMATICS COMPETITIONS

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The Executive Committee of the International Mathematics Union (IMU)  
c/o IMU President, Distinguished Professor and  
Director-General Mori Shigefumi  
Kyoto University Institute for Advanced Study  
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It is my opinion that the tiniest moral matter is more important than all of science, and that one can only maintain the moral quality of the world by standing up to any immoral project.

—Luitzen Egbertus Jan Brouwer

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

—Elie Wiesel

Honorable President Mori, Members of the IMU Executive Committee,

Permit us, the Executive Committee of the World Federation of National Mathematics Competitions (WFNMC), express our concern regarding one of your prizes. The Internet home pages of the International Mathematics Union (IMU), state:

The Rolf Nevanlinna Prize in mathematical aspects of information science was established by the Executive Committee of the International Mathematical Union (IMU) in April 1981. It was decided that the prize should consist of a gold medal and a cash prize similar to the ones associated with the Fields Medal and that one prize should be given at each International Congress of Mathematicians. The prize was named the Rolf Nevanlinna Prize in honor of Rolf Nevanlinna (1895–1980), who had been Rector of the University of Helsinki and President of the IMU and who in the 1950s had taken the initiative to the computer organization at Finnish universities.

In establishing this prize, The Executive Committee of IMU must have not known the views and deeds of Professor Nevanlinna during the period of the Third Reich and World War II. In the 15-page summary (Stern, M., A Review of the book by Olli Lehto, *Korkeat Maaillmat. Rolf Nevanlinnan elämä*, Otava, Helsinki, 2001) of the 317-page biography of Rolf

Nevanlinna, written by his student (Ph.D., 1949) and advocate Olli Lehto, who also served as the Secretary of IMU (1983-1990), we read:

In 1933 Hitler became the German Reichskanzler. Up to the year 1943 Nevanlinna was of the opinion that Hitler [!] in German history could be compared to Friedrich the Great and Bismarck... This contributed to... his Nazi-friendly convictions in particular, which he expressed in a series of speeches and publications. Nevanlinna, however, has never been a member of a National Socialist party and did not hold anti-Semitic positions. When in Finland as well as in Germany the thought arose to establish a Finnish Volunteers Battalion, Nevanlinna welcomed this idea and agreed to the deployment of volunteers unreservedly. On the demand of [Reichsführer SS] Himmler there was developed the SS Battalion, and in the summer of 1942 Nevanlinna became the Chairman of the SS Volunteers Committee of this [Waffen-SS] Battalion!

Elsewhere Olli Lehto addresses the Nazi leadership role of his teacher Rolf Nevanlinna again (<http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/english/?id=7111>):

Rolf Herman Nevanlinna (1895–1980), a professor of mathematics (1926–1946) and Rektor (1941–1944) at Helsinki University; professor of applied mathematics at the University of Zurich (1946–1963, Honorary Professor starting in 1949). In 1942, at the request of the Foreign Minister, Nevanlinna made himself available as chairman of the SS Volunteer Committee, which handled the recruitment of Finnish SS troops. After the war, Nevanlinna came in for especial condemnation [!] for his involvement in these activities.

On March 25, 1941, Nevanlinna writes to Helmut Hasse as follows (Georgiadou, M., *Constantin Carathéodory: Mathematics and Politics in Turbulent Times*, Springer, Berlin, 2004.; p. 393):

You know, dear Herr Hasse, your remarks about the hypocritical and stupid “moral indignation of Western politicians, who try to hide their hate against Germany under the mantle of nice phrases,” correspond completely to what we feel here and say to ourselves daily. You know those deeply rooted sympathies which connect us Finns with Germany, these bonds are today stronger than ever now that the easily understandable irritation caused by our difficult time a year ago has died down . . .

It is absolutely clear to us that only a strong and powerful Germany, the heart of Europe, is capable of forming the fate of European community in the way, which the interest of all European nations of culture demands. Personally, I am firmly convinced thereof and I believe to see a total justification of this conviction in European history, namely that Germany is today summoned not only to save European culture, which already happened in 1933, but to lead it to an undreamt-of blooming. The world-historic significance of the present hour is immense.

We hope the IMU Executive Committee agrees with us that we may not ignore or minimize Nevanlinna’s willing and eager service as the Chairman of the Finnish SS Troops

Committee, his giving a number of speeches in support of Nazi Germany, and claiming that Hitler saved European culture. Professor Nevanlinna was a fine mathematician, IMU President (1959–1962), and Finland offered to pay for the prize (negligible amount really), but mustn't we take into account the public deeds and moral bearings of the person whose profile we etch on our medals? Mathematics for us should not be above all moral concerns. As far as the medal for "the mathematical aspects of information science" is concerned, there have been worthier candidates, professionally and personally, for example, such great pioneers as John von Neumann, Alan Turing, Claude Shannon, and Norbert Wiener.

The Executive Committee of WFNMC urges the Executive Committee of IMU to change the name of the prize and the medal. We appreciate receiving your prompt constructive reply.

Cordially,

Alexander Soifer, Professor, WFNMC President,  
On behalf of the WFNMC Executive Committee