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## Preface

There is no Nobel prize in mathematics. Perhaps this is a good thing. Nobel prizes create so much public attention that mathematicians would lose their concentration to work.

There are several other prizes for mathematicians. There is the Fields medal (only for mathematicians). This medal is awarded to mathematicians who are at most 40 in the year of the International Congress of Mathematicians where the medals are presented. Thus it honours outstanding work and encourages further efforts. The Fields medal is perhaps best known and is often called the Nobel prize in mathematics. World Scientific has published a book of the Fields medallists' lectures.

Then there is the Wolf prize. The Wolf foundation describes the prize as follows: "The WOLF FOUNDATION began its activities in 1976, with an initial endowment fund of 10 million U.S. dollars donated in its entirety by the Wolf family. The main founders were Dr. Riccardo Subirana Lobo Wolf and his wife Francisca . . . . Since 1978 five or six annual prizes are awarded to outstanding scientists and artists, irrespective of nationality, race, colour, religion, sex or political view, for achievements in the interest of mankind and friendly relations among people. In Science, the fields are: AGRICULTURE; CHEMISTRY; MATHEMATICS; MEDICINE; PHYSICS, and in ARTS, the prize rotates annually among Music, Painting, Sculpture and Architecture . . . . The official presentation of the prizes takes place at the Knesset building (Israel's parliament) and the winners are handed their awards by the President of the State of Israel at a special ceremony . . . ."

The Fields medal goes to young people, and indeed many mathematicians do their best work in the early years of their life. The Wolf prize often honours the achievements of a whole life. But it may also honour the work of young people.

The first Wolf prize winners in mathematics were Izrail M. Gelfand and Carl L. Siegel (1978). Siegel was born in 1896 and Gelfand in 1913. Gelfand is still active at Rutgers University. Several prize winners were born before 1910. Thus the achievements of the prize winners cover much of the twentieth century.

The documents collected in these two volumes characterize the Wolf prize winners in a form not available up to now: bibliographies and curricula vitae, autobiographical accounts, early papers or especially important papers, lectures and speeches, for example at International Congresses, as well as reports on the work of the prize winners by others. Since the work of the Wolf laureates covers a wide spectrum, a large part of contemporary mathematics comes to life in these books.

Mathematical prize winners are usually quite modest. They know that the selection committee had to choose from a large list of excellent candidates and that not only merit is needed to receive a prize, but also much luck. Quite different sets of mathematicians could illustrate with their work just as well the development of mathematics in the period covered by the Wolf prizes.

The volumes are also a symbol of thanks to the donors who made the Wolf foundation possible and to all who worked, and work, for the success of the foundation. The editors also thank all mathematicians who prepared the material for deceased Wolf prize winners. Without their generous help the two volumes would be very incomplete.

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