

Lives remembered

Friedrich Hirzebruch

Professor Andrew Ranicki writes: Friedrich Hirzebruch (obituary, June 22) had a personal charisma and charm unusual in a mathematician. On his first day working as a cleaner in British Army barracks in Hamm in 1945 he was noticed by a British officer who arranged that he should do mathematics instead — this was when Hirzebruch was only 17, before his illustrious career had started. In 1948 he made contact in Zurich with the German-Jewish topologist Heinz Hopf, who immediately recognised both his personal and mathematical abilities, took him under his wing and spent a week talking to him about mathematics. By contrast, a few years later at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, Einstein was wary of any contact with the young German. Hirzebruch became the conscience of German mathematics. He felt a particular affinity and responsibility for mathematicians affected by the Holocaust, either directly or in the following generations. As president of the German Mathematical Society he was the honorary president of the 1998 International Congress of Mathematicians in Berlin. In his address Hirzebruch said: “Many of my age have good friends all over the world whose parents or other family members were killed in Auschwitz. We must teach the next generation not to forget.”

He himself set an example by commemorating the two prominent German-Jewish Bonn mathematicians directly affected: Otto Toeplitz, who managed to emigrate to Palestine in 1939, and Felix Hausdorff, who committed suicide together with his wife in January 1942 rather than face “deportation to the East”. Appropriately, Hirzebruch is buried in the Poppelsdorf Cemetery in Bonn, close to the final resting place of the Hausdorffs.
