Mathematician Paul Erdos Dies

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WARSAW, Poland (AP) -- Paul Erdos, one of the century's most eminent mathematicians, has died of a heart attack. He was 83.

The Hungarian-American mathematician died Friday at the Medical Academy Hospital in Warsaw, Poland, the Hungarian Embassy said. He had been attending an international conference of mathematicians.

A member of Britain's Royal Society and the national academies of Hungary, the Netherlands, the United States, Australia and India, Erdos traveled from university to university all over the world to discuss mathematical problems with other academics.

Erdos was so devoted to mathematics that he had no home or personal possessions, The New York Times said in Tuesday's editions.

He would stay with mathematicians wherever he went; his colleagues would lend him money, feed him, buy his clothes, even do his taxes.

''Property is nuisance,'' he once said.

Erdos was known for his work in numbers theory, theory of sets and probability theory. He also founded the field of discrete mathematics, the foundation of computer science, the Times said.

''In our century, in which mathematics is so strongly dominated by 'theory doctors,' he has remained the prince of problem solvers and the absolute monarch of problem posers,'' said Dr. Ernst Straus, who worked with both Erdos and Albert Einstein.

The tribute to Erdos, quoted by the Times, was written shortly before Straus's death in 1983.

Born on March 26, 1913, to a Jewish family in Budapest, Erdos moved to Britain in 1934 and settled in the United States four years later.

He became a U.S. citizen before returning to Hungary in 1954.

Mathematicians liked to brag about their connections to Erdos by citing their ‘‘Erdos number.’’ A person who had published a paper with Erdos had an Erdos number 1. If he or she had published with someone who had published with Erdos, they had a Erdos number of 2, and so on.

‘‘I’m getting e-mail messages from around the world, saying, ‘Tell me it isn’t so,’’ Dr. Ronald Graham, the director of the information sciences research center at AT&T Laboratories, told the Times. ‘‘He’s among the top 10’’ mathematicians of the century.

Erdos’ ‘‘driving force was his desire to understand and to know,’’ Graham said. ‘‘You think of it as Erdos’ magnificent obsession. It determined everything in his life.’’

He never married and left no survivors.

Back to the top
