

Photographer: Denis Dailleux



AGENCE VU

Those events dictated everything. Different people had different reactions to this kind of youth. A great many people were left with an enormous desire for calm and regularity because life had been rough: they were tired of big events. Somehow I reacted differently. I do not particularly like danger. I didn't like the close encounters with danger. But I found that I could bear them. And they brought other advantages. Being raised under such hair-raising conditions can have a strong effect on someone's personality.

How did the war affect your thinking about maths?

Until mid-1942, my education was only a little disrupted. After that, until early 1944, it was very disrupted and life was very dangerous. The winter of 1944 was awful and at the same time one of the high points of my life. During that time, it became clear that I had a peculiar gift of being able to almost instantaneously transform into geometry everything that I could handle in my head.

Has this been your prime motivation?

What motivates me now are ideas I developed 10, 20 or 30 years ago, and the feeling that these ideas may be lost if I don't push them a little bit further. Does that matter? Most ideas in science that are abandoned are picked up by someone else later, but not all. I have reflected on this issue a great deal. Perhaps I would like to finish my ideas for aesthetic reasons – a feeling of closure.

Are there any neglected parts of maths that you think today's mathematicians should revisit?

There are plenty. I think that mathematics is one of the best fields in that respect. Something that is 150 years old in maths is old but not dead and dried to dust. It is so different from physics, where something that is 100 years old but not in textbooks is, for all practical purposes, dead.

In your latest book you take on the world of finance. What is so attractive about the stock market?

When you've chosen the kind of life I have chosen to live, you must not let opportunities pass by. I recently had the chance to work with Richard Hudson,

clue how to go beyond them.

My uncle didn't know either, but he said it was the most beautiful problem imaginable and that it was a shame to neglect it. He insisted that it was important to learn Julia's work and he pushed me hard to understand how equations behave when you iterate them rather than solve them.

At first, I couldn't find anything to say. But later, I decided a computer could take over where Julia had stopped 60 years previously.

You have recently started writing your memoirs. What has that been like?

It has been a strange exercise.

How so?

To realise what one remembers and what one doesn't remember. My life seemed to be a series of events and accidents. Yet when I look back I see a pattern. For a long time that pattern was imposed by catastrophes, namely the fall of Poland and the occupation of France during the second world war.

"The beauty of geometry is that it is a language of extraordinary subtlety"