



which made a big difference to my work. I could relate mathematical formulae to pictures.

Is that where the Mandelbrot set came from?

The Mandelbrot set is the modern development of a theory developed independently in 1918 by Gaston Julia and Pierre Fatou. Julia wrote an enormous book – several hundred pages long – and was very hostile to his rival Fatou. That killed the subject for 60 years because nobody had a

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"