

# Witold Hurewicz—Personal Reminiscences

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I first met Hurewicz when I was a student at the University of Warsaw. It was around 1932–1933. To me he was an idol, a Jew from Poland who became a prominent world mathematician in a field I was in love with: an ideal to admire and to follow. Hurewicz was then in Holland and came to Warsaw almost once a year. We talked about mathematics, and I discussed what I was doing. He was supportive and helpful. Once when I proved something good, I wrote to him and received a very congratulatory reply. I still have that letter.

At the same time I met Lefschetz who visited Warsaw on several occasions. We all three met in Oslo in 1936 on the occasion of the International Mathematical Congress. At that time my future was discussed, and it was agreed that I should visit Western Europe first (Paris, Zürich, Oxford, and Cambridge) before moving to America. In the fall of 1936 I started implementing this plan and went to Paris for a six-month stay. I was helped in various ways by Professor Waclaw Sierpiński. At the time Hurewicz was already in America.

With tensions in Europe and in Poland mounting by the day I carried out the plan speedily and in 1937 and 1938 had two long stays in England. In the fall of 1938 I was in Warsaw when a letter arrived from Lefschetz that he and Hurewicz had prevailed upon Ray Wilder to invite me to Michigan. The letter was and had to be ambivalent. I was invited to be a student (though I was already two years past my Ph.D.). This was needed to get a Polish passport and an American visa.

I left early in April 1939, and this time I took all my reprints and books with me. After spending a few days in Oxford to revisit J. H. C. Whitehead, I took the good ship *Manhattan* for New York (the *Manhattan* became a troopship during the war and was sunk in the Pacific).

I arrived to New York on April 27, 1939, and there at the pier were Hurewicz and Wallman to take me by car for about ten days to Princeton, which was then the undisputed mathematical mecca of the world. On the way we stopped for a snack, and I was introduced to cinnamon toast, which just became a big fad. I was also introduced to car trouble, as the lights refused to work when we were ready to continue.

Mathematically, I was profoundly influenced by Hurewicz's papers in homotopy theory (particularly [32],<sup>1</sup> [33], [34], [35], and [36]). Reprints of these five papers I had bound together, and I reread them from time to time. They are an important relic to me.

When Hurewicz died in Merida after the Mexico City conference of 1956, I and several other participants were still in Mexico City. I remember sitting with a group of friends in the gardens of a hotel (a converted cloisterlike seventeenth-century hospital) when the news arrived. It was a black day.