Letter from the editors

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This issue of the *Lettera Matematica International Edition* is the translation of issue no. 100 of the Italian *Lettera Matematica PRISTEM* and further it is published in the same months in which its “mother”, the research centre PRISTEM (<http://matematica.unibocconi.it/>) of the Bocconi University, Milan, celebrates its 30 years of activity. These are important numbers, and even a little worrying... years go by! But now is not the time to introduce hints of sadness or concern. It is a time to celebrate all the friends and colleagues who have taken part in the adventure of this journal, the editors who produced all the issues, the authors who have made them interesting and meaningful with their articles.

The history of Italian *Lettera* began in 1990, during the 2-day conference organised by the PRISTEM at Bocconi University about “Mathematical thought in the Italian culture and society of the 1990s”. It was not yet the journal it would become, but a Xeroxed bulletin, distributed to conference participants and that, in perspective, would hopefully become a tool especially useful for historians of mathematics. The introduction to that issue zero mentioned a

“model for the news-sheet” that the PRISTEM was going to prepare for the following autumn. “Autumn” would actually become 1991, when the first three issues of *Lettera* were published. The adjective *matematica* did not yet appear in the masthead; the journal’s name was then just *Lettera PRISTEM*. It would become *Lettera Matematica PRISTEM* on the advice of Giovanni Prodi, who was always very close to *Lettera* and suggested making an explicit reference to the mathematical world in order to assert our identity more directly. Already by 1992 the magazine changed its appearance, going from a simple photocopy to an offset printing, assuming a layout more like the present one—the model being a journal of popular philosophy published by the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici (Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies) in Naples, with which the PRISTEM cooperated closely. This remained unchanged until issue 23, the first published by Springer Italia. Then, with issue 31, colour has made its appearance. Finally (at least for now...) in 2013, this English-language *International Edition* appeared.

Lettera accompanied all other activities of the PRISTEM (conferences, refresher courses, mathematical game competitions and so on) and led the way for its other magazines: *PRISTEM Storia*, *Alice & Bob* and *Scienza e società*. This, in the most concise terms possible, is the history of the *Lettera*. We find it difficult to say more: *Lettera* has been an important part of our professional life (and, a bit, of our life *tout court*). Still, the publication of the hundredth issue is too good an opportunity not to hazard an assessment of the collective enterprise in which we participated.

Simonetta Di Sieno, who launched *Lettera* and directed its first 30 numbers, recalls:

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In the beginning, it was to be only a bulletin for historians of mathematics, to spread news and establish contacts. The reactions of some mathematicians shifted its axis. Their interest in an opportunity to speak to a large public about present-day mathematics soon showed us that we could carry out a task we loved: start a vehicle for popularisation that would combine scientific correctness and elegant exposition, speaking to the expert but opening the doors even to those who were technically more naive, showing how mathematics is naturally culture, and how it cannot be relinquished without society paying too big a price to injustice and irrationality. We had the merit of rising to the challenge and not being too scared.

Lettera emerged from the desire to read and write about the topics that interest us, without too many boundaries and limitations: reading and writing about mathematics; posing questions, hypotheses and opinions on what is afoot in the field of research; reading and writing about the history and philosophy of mathematics, as well as about the problems of teaching; evaluating, critically when needed, the way in which universities and scientific societies transfer mathematical methods and contents in the Italian society. This was all done rigorously and thoroughly, and without unnecessary jargon, which sometimes is simply an excuse to avoid taking responsibility for an overall assessment. In the words of Pietro Nastasi, who was one of the originators of the *Lettera* project and one of the most robust pillars of the editorial staff:

One of the most frequently recurring images of what I wanted to do 100 issues ago consists in the need for a journal that speaks about mathematics, without qualifications nor watertight compartments, developing the historical and philosophical aspects, but without the technicalities of the historical and philosophical sciences; the need for a journal that also spoke of the problems in the teaching of mathematics, but without claiming to teach how to teach.

This is a need that we have tried to meet without waiting for the delays of those who moved with short-sighted prudence, and instead with the help of those institutions, primarily Bocconi University, that believed in our project and helped it to grow.

Lettera was born of the belief that disseminating their results is part of the mathematicians' profession, and that this, in a certain sense, is an aid to their research. It was born of the conviction that mathematical journalism can be done by writing in a way that is precise but not necessarily

boring, in journals whose graphics are not necessarily bleak, even when what is being talked about is “difficult” mathematics, modern mathematics, how it is changing society and our everyday life. There is a mathematical audience (consisting of both mathematicians and “simple” passionate enthusiasts of the discipline) to be sought out and made to grow, without expecting that our interlocutor will always recognise our value a priori. We are no longer the only ones to say this: what we have outlined is a trend that has begun to establish itself in the world of Italian mathematics. This represents a makeover of popular science to which *Lettera* has made its contribution, rewarded by the interactions which it was thus able to develop along with other successful initiatives.

We made our contribution so that the mathematical world could come closer to other spheres of culture and be perceived as one of the most dynamic engines of the development of Italian society. It is no coincidence that the 1990 conference with issue zero was devoted to mathematical thought in Italian culture and society. *Lettera* has always stressed that mathematicians are people... normal people, like other intellectuals, called perhaps to the specific, further task of showing their readiness to take part in shared civic engagement, to resume that journey that had seen Italian mathematicians among the protagonists of the Risorgimento and the building of the Italian State in the first half-century of the history of unified Italy.

This is what we wanted to share with you about the first 100 issues of *Lettera*, a journey that closes with a return to the ABCs of our school days, with a (brief) article for each of the 26 letters of the alphabet. As to the future, we'll see. Otherwise, what would we have to discuss in future editorial meetings?

Enjoy your reading!

Translated from the Italian by Daniele A. Gewurz.

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Settimo Termini was professor of Theoretical Computer Science at the Universities of Palermo and Perugia, directing—from 2002 to 2009—the Istituto di Cibernetica “Eduardo Caianiello” of the Italian National Research Council (CNR) in Naples. A theoretical physicist by training, he has been mainly concerned with problems raised by the treatment of incomplete and revisable information in complex systems and, recently, with the connections among scientific

research, innovation and economic development. His work forms the basis of the “Theory of measures of fuzziness”. Fellow of the

International Fuzzy Systems Association (IFSA) and the Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere ed Arti, his books include: *Aspects of Vagueness* (with Heinz J. Skala and Enric Trillas; Kluwer, 1984); *Imagination and Rigor* (Springer, 2006); *Contro il declino* (with Pietro Greco; Codice, 2007); *Memoria e Progetto* (with Pietro Greco; GEM 2010).