



An Interview

with **Samuel Lopes***

by **Peter Gothen****

A meeting on this scale is only possible with the support and hard work of many people and organizations. Could you give an idea of who was involved, and is there any contribution which was particularly important?

The main actors were the American Mathematical Society (AMS), in particular Georgia Benkart, from

whom the idea of such a meeting stemmed, the Portuguese Mathematical Society (SPM), which was very enthusiastic about the idea, and the local organizers, namely Adérito Araújo (Univ. Coimbra), Mário Bessa (Univ. Beira Interior), André Oliveira (Univ. Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro), and Sílvio Gama,

* Chair of the Organizing Committee of the Joint International Meeting of the American, European and Portuguese Mathematical Societies, Porto, June 2015

** Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade do Porto

José Abílio Matos, Leonor Moreira, João Nuno Tavares and myself (Univ. Porto).

The SPM secretariat was outstanding and a pleasure to work with. All the support from the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Porto (FCUP) and the Public Relations Department of the University of Porto was also extremely helpful. Lastly, the student volunteers we had during the conference were tireless, committed and absolutely invaluable.

What was the most difficult task in organizing the meeting?

For a meeting of this dimension and considering that almost everything was done locally without resorting to external professional services, all tasks were difficult. Perhaps the most difficult one was predicting everything that would be needed, all that could go wrong (power failures, plumbing accidents, etc.) and ways to resolve potential problems.

Another difficult issue was related to timings and deadlines. The conference had been in the planning since 2010, and in general the AMS expects concrete details on space and facilities well in advance, as well as solid plans for the organization and activities prepared. But on the Portuguese and even the European side, most services and facilities are not prepared to plan that far in advance. For example, due to changes in administrations and other issues, we had to re-plan and re-negotiate with most services several times, and all agreements had to be checked and re-checked often, which considerably affected our stress levels!

How did the scientific level of the meeting compare with your expectations?

The Scientific Committee did a great job with selecting the invited addresses and ensuring we would have top quality special sessions, so I had high expectations to begin with. In the end, and in spite of the unfortunate absence of several great mathematicians, like for instance Mikhail Khovanov, who had plans to attend the conference but, mostly for health reasons, could not, I think the conference achieved a remarkable quality. Processing registrations daily and going through the speakers lists to compile the program, I would invariably recognize important names in all fields of mathematics.

Was it worthwhile for a relatively small society like the Portuguese Mathematical Society to be involved in the organization of a major event of this kind?

I cannot speak for the SPM, but I believe they were quite satisfied with the outcome of the meeting. The SPM embraced the idea of the meeting from the very beginning, which I think reveals the society's forward thinking. The podcast <http://tv.up.pt/videos/wz8453bp> by SPM's President, Fernando Pestana da Costa, shows some of the society's motives for hosting such a meeting.

What were the main benefits of the meeting for the Portuguese Mathematical Society and, more broadly, the Portuguese mathematical community?

The meeting gave a lot of visibility to the research done by mathematicians in Portugal, as the community was very well represented among the speakers and organizers of special sessions. From what I could gather, the meeting potentiated several new collaborations, and I know of several cases of co-authors who met for the first time at the meeting. It was also important for the public awareness of mathematics, undoubtedly one of SPM's goals, mostly thanks to the excellent job done by the University of Porto's Public Relations Department: the conference was featured in the television news, newspapers and radio.

How and to what extent did the meeting contribute to the visibility of mathematical research, and mathematics more broadly, in Portuguese society?

I think it had a very important role, by showing the general public that mathematics is an exciting field of research gathering people from all around the world to discuss their latest results and conjectures. Too often, mathematics is viewed as a dead subject, created, developed and closed centuries ago, which couldn't be further from the truth. Fortunately, I believe this misconception is getting more and more challenged with the help of a lot of public awareness actions by the mathematical community, and I hope this conference also helped in this respect.

Did you involve students in the organization? If so, how did you involve them, and did they benefit from taking part?



Peter Gothen

Yes, we had a group of about 40 students helping out with registration, computer facilities, giving directions and walking with the participants between venues. As I mentioned above, their help was invaluable, and I was very impressed by the level and quality of their contribution. We had students from Coimbra and Lisbon volunteer to join the group of student organizers. Although it was very hard work for them, I believe this was a great experience for them: as volunteers they got to speak to top-tier mathematicians whom they would otherwise be shy to talk to, and to attend their lectures. Hopefully, this will impact their future lives as mathematicians.

What kind of feedback have you received from participants and the mathematical societies involved?

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, which to me was a very rewarding surprise. Some things did not go as well as had been planned, but either no one noticed or, more likely, the participants were understanding and generous enough to overlook these faults. The organizing committee was very careful

and meticulous, but with such a big meeting I was definitely expecting a lot of problems and maybe a catastrophe or two. Fortunately I was wrong!

Do you know if there are any meetings of a similar kind planned for the future - or was this a one-off event?

As far as I know, there are no future joint AMS-SPM, EMS-SPM or AMS-EMS meetings planned. In some countries, like Israel and South Africa, there has been a second joint meeting with the AMS although, to my knowledge, these meetings have been smaller than the one in Porto.

Was it worth all the hard work?

One year ago I would have had to pause before answering such a question but—and I think I speak for all the organizers—the answer has been absolutely clear since June 14th, 2015: yes, it was well worth it!