

Guido's Book of Conjectures : collected by Indira Chatterji

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GUIDO'S BOOK OF CONJECTURES

Collected by Indira CHATTERJI

A gift to *Guido Mislin*
on the occasion of his retirement from ETHZ
June 2006

FOREWORD BY GWYNYTH MISLIN

This book containing conjectures is meant to occupy my husband, Guido Mislin, during the long years of his retirement. I view this project with appreciation, since I was wondering how that mission was to be accomplished. In the thirty-five years of our acquaintance, Guido has usually kept busy with his several jobs, our children and occasional, but highly successful projects that he has undertaken around the house. The prospect of a Guido unleashed from the ETH, unfettered by professional duties of any sort, wandering around the world as a free agent with, in fact, nothing to do, is a prospect that would frighten nations if they knew it was imminent. I find it a little scary myself, so I am in a position to appreciate the existence of this project from the bottom of my heart.

Of course, the book is much more than the sum of its parts. It wouldn't take Guido long to read a single page in a book, but a page containing a conjecture, particularly a good one, might take him years. This would, of course, be a very good thing.

Though not any sort of mathematician, I have observed the field long enough to know that mathematicians do not share our mundane reality. They breathe a more rarefied air. For example, in the regular world one might say,

“there is a dead chicken on that table” or “there is no dead chicken on that table.” In this example, one would have little trouble proving the point either way, because a close examination of the table would quickly reveal whether it held a dead chicken or not. Now, in the world of the mathematician, this alternative simply did not offer enough scope, so in the last century a third possibility was provided. Currently we have the case of the table with a dead chicken, the table with no dead chicken, and the table where it will never be proven whether there is a dead chicken on it or not. In that case, one would declare the problem undecidable, which means that it probably cannot be proven one way or the other so don’t bother. Impressive, isn’t it? When one hits a wall in mathematics, the wall simply gets redefined or reinvented. I only wish it were that simple for the rest of us.

Guido is fortunate to have the promise this book offers of interesting conjectures in his future and he is also very fortunate to have the interest and the efforts of his friends and colleagues who contributed, particularly Indira Chatterji whose idea and hard work this book represents. As for me, Guido is my own wondrous undecidable conjecture and that has been the greatest good fortune of my life.

Gwynyth Mislin, June 2006.