Gian-Carlo Rota and the Founding of the Journal of Combinatorial Theory

Edwin F. Beschler[1]

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF GIAN-CARLO ROTA

The *Journal of Combinatorial Theory* was conceived and created during

cialty journals in the sciences, but the majority of serious scientific journals were published by societies or university presses, not by commercial publishers. On the other hand, European publishing houses had been producing such journals for a century or more. And the growth of scientific research level publishing in America, beginning in the late 1930s and early 1940s, was largely in the hands of the immigrant descendants of this old tradition.

Academic Press, whose owners had their roots in Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, Leipzig, had embarked on a program of mathematics journals in a variety of fields that eventually included algebra, differential equations, functional analysis, number theory, systems theory, economic theory, and others. As the acquisitions editor responsible for this program, I was very much attuned to advice about developing fields and discussed many possibilities with every advisor, formal or informal, who was willing to share his or her visions for the future. As everyone who knew Gian-Carlo Rota can imagine, I found in him a rich source of ideas and direction in how to pursue them.

I do not know what discussions or negotiations might have gone on with various members of the combinatorics community prior to my meeting Rota. It is probable that quite a number of ideas were being explored among different groups. The background from my point of view was clear

[1] Edwin F. Beschler was for many years an acquisitions editor in mathematics for Academic Press and, in later years, for Birkhauser Boston. In retirement he lives in Boston, edits mathematics manuscripts for a number of publishers, and is a publishing consultant to Mosely Associates in New York City. E-mail: edwinb@att.net.

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and simple. I had been pursuing the idea of a journal devoted to a field that, at that time, was tantalizingly amorphous—applied logic. In my time, a definition never materialized, but at the heart of my discussions with, in particular, logicians and computer scientists, was reference to the ideas and mechanisms of combinatorics. Thus the prospect of a journal devoted to this field was literally music to the publisher's ears, the tune having been played to the Academic Press mathematics editor in London by Frank Harary (on one of his many visits to England) and to me by Gian-Carlo in my peregrinations around MIT. This was the subject matter that brought me together with Gian-Carlo and began a long association in which he advised me in the creation of many other successful undertakings.

Given the diversity of combinatorics and its (at the time) ill-defined and chaotic nature, a core journal devoted to it would be well positioned to be highly influential in defining its future. Practitioners of the art of combinatorics ranged from some very pure mathematicians, whose main interests lay in firming up the foundations, to some very applied mathematicians, whose major goal was to exploit the power of combinatorics to solve problems in a vast range of physical, biological, and social sciences. How to achieve a proper balance in the pages of one publication that was scheduled to appear quarterly and be limited to 500 pages was a formidable problem, in particular given the prestige and passion of some of the leaders in the field who were involved.

It was clear from the beginning that a prerequisite for success of the journal was a judicious mixture of applications and pure mathematical studies, as well as a definition of quality standards that would be accepted by the entire board and the community. It is to the credit of both founders of the journal, Frank Harary and Gian-Carlo Rota, that their hard work and leadership pulled together and published the first issues to general acclaim of authors and readers alike. Although no Editor-in-Chief had been named, W. T. Tutte agreed to play that role, with Ron Mullin in support as the de facto Managing Editor. Volume One, Number One appeared in June 1966 with a Foreword by George Polya in which he called it "a stepping stone to further progress." The time was ripe for the subject, financial support for libraries was strong, and the *Journal of Combinatorial Theory* quickly attained a subscription level that would sustain its existence and growth.

However, no single journal or set of editors, prestigious and hard-working as they might be, could overcome the tremendous diversity in hopes and aspirations for combinatorics. Competition for page allocations and scheduling soon led to intolerable strains on the editorial board and there developed a real threat to continuing cooperation and growth. Etched in my memory is an evening in the late 1960s when Gian-Carlo and I dined at the Edgewater Hotel in Madison, Wisconsin, during one of the numerous combinatorics meetings that was representative of the times. Our

avowed purpose that evening was to create new guidelines to settle disputes and give better guidance to the editorial board for the future. Our two main accomplishments for the evening were (1) to deplete the Edgewater's entire stock of Moet et Chandon, and (2) to determine that we had to dismiss the entire editorial board and start all over again. Those who knew Gian-Carlo will recognize a typical strategy of Machiavellian directness in addressing a problem. How blessed was the cold light of dawn when good sense, succinctly expressed by the then managing editor Dan Younger who pointed out the suicidal nature of such a decision, brought us back to consideration of a more sensible course.[2]

And thus occurred the bifurcation of the journal into Parts A and B. Theodore S. Motzkin agreed to assume the Chief Editorship of Part A. Tragically, Motzkin died within the first year of his appointment, after which Marshall Hall agreed to take it over with the support of Basil Gordon and Bruce Rothschild as co-Managing Editors. W. T. Tutte accepted the invitation to be the Editor-in Chief of Part B, retaining Dan Younger as his Managing Editor. Members of the editorial board were asked to serve on one board or the other; a few were asked to serve on both. Academic Press benefited from having two journals rather than one, and the broad community of combinatorics gained additional pages and editorial direction to pursue its diversity of ends.

The experience for me was salutary in my coming to understand the depth of Gian-Carlo's perceptions, boldness in action, and breadth of skills in bringing visions to reality. He proved to be a mentor to me in the wide range of human emotions and interactions that can determine the course of an intellectual development. The growth of combinatorics over the succeeding years stands as an apt example. Gianco was a strong editorial support for the entire Academic Press mathematics program for many years following the founding of *JCT*. I am most gratified to have had the benefit of his advice and friendship both in those days and in the subsequent and last days of my publishing career.

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[2] Two other mathematicians participated in that gregarious occasion but, since they were mainly observers of the discussion, their identities and personal reactions have disappeared into the mists of time. I mention this since I was certain that Frank Harary was included, but he assures me he was not. On the other hand, Frank recalls a similarly festive dinner at the Top of the Rockies in Denver, where Gian-Carlo exercised his famous taste in wines by refusing the offered bottle of Chateau-Lafitte Rothschild, 1923. In perfect symmetry, I do not recall participating in that occasion. Thus is our history marked with a mixture of drama, good wine, strong personalities, and unverifiable recollections.