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John (Janos) von Neumann was born in Budapest, Hungary, on December 8, 1903. His talents were discovered early by his school teachers and he was privately tutored in mathematics by university teachers. His first paper appeared before he was 18 years old. Interestingly, he obtained his doctorate in Mathematics in Budapest about the same time as his degree in chemical engineering in Zurich!

He was a Privat Dozent for three years at the Universities of Berlin and Hamburg before migrating to the USA as a visiting lecturer at Princeton University in 1930 where he soon became a professor. When the Institute for Advanced Study was established in Princeton in 1933 he moved there as a permanent professor. He played a leading role in the Los Alamos atomic bomb project from its beginning.

Von Neumann's brilliant and original contributions cover the wide spectrum of scientific thought of his times. He combined in his mind several abilities that one rarely finds in one intellect — a feeling for the set-theoretical, formally algebraic basis of mathematical thought, the knowledge and understanding of the substance of classical mathematics in analysis and geometry, and an acute perception of the potential of modern mathematics for the formulation and solution of problems in other branches of human endeavour. This last mentioned ability is amply demonstrated in his most original creation, Game Theory.

After his early work in the foundations of mathematics wherein he formulated the von Neumann-Bernays-Gödel set theory and gave a new definition of ordinal numbers he turned his attention to providing a rigorous mathematical formulation of quantum mechanics. His book, Die Mathematische Grundlagen der Quantum Mechanik is still a classic on the subject. This work motivated him to study operators on Hilbert spaces where he initiated the study of certain rings of operators, von Neumann algebras. This is now a very active area of research and has had profound impact on the development of various branches of mathematics.

His other major contributions to mathematics include the solution to Hilbert's fifth problem for the case of compact groups and the first proof of the mean ergodic theorem. In Game Theory he formulated and proved the minimax (minimising the maximum losses) principle. He did pioneering work in devising electronic computing machines.

He was famed for his remarkable ability to solve in his head, problems that made other mathematicians turn to pen and paper or even calculators.

Von Neumann stories abound. After an automobile crash in Princeton he came out of his wrecked car to explain, "the trees on the right were passing me in orderly fashion at 60 miles per hour. Suddenly one of them stepped out into my path!"

Von Neumann and his first wife, Marietta Kovesi had a daughter, Marina. His second wife, Klara Dan later became one of the first coders of mathematical problems for electronic computing machines.

He died in Washington on February 8, 1957.