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## Kurt Gödel

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# Kurt Gödel

For some people Kurt Gödel was the greatest mathematician of the twentieth century. Well, I'm not crazy about superlatives, but Gödel was *remarkable*. He was born in 1906, part of a German enclave in Moravia, later to become part of Czechoslovakia.

His people were textile workers. He was shy, *edgy*, and so curious about everything that his family called him Herr Warum – Mr. Why. He was already expert in languages, philosophy, and (especially) in math by the time he finished high school. He finished his doctoral dissertation in math while he was still 23. His *thesis* was on an *arcane* subject: *incompleteness*. Gödel was on his way to showing the world something it didn't really care to hear. The body of his work eventually convinced us that, if we create any logical system with a complete set of *axioms*, those axioms cannot be *consistent*. And that's *devastating*. It means our best-laid system of logic will never give us the whole truth.

In any case, Gödel was still in his twenties when the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies discovered him. He spent time there, on and off, during the 1930s. During this time, he was also on the faculty of the University of Vienna. His teaching there was awful. He lectured to the *blackboard* and attracted few students. He also spent time being *institutionalized* for *recurrent severe* depression.

Toward the late 1930s there was good news and bad news for Gödel. In 1938 he was married – to a nightclub dancer. The bad news was that Hitler's *noose* was tightening. Gödel had run with Jewish intellectuals when he was in college. He was now about to lose his university post and be *hauled off* into the Wehrmacht.

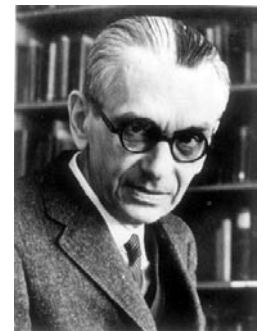
So he and his new wife fled Austria. It was too dangerous to go west, so they took a train across Siberia and caught a ship from Yokohama to San Francisco. From then on, Gödel worked at Princeton. He and Einstein became close friends; but he was sceptical of Einstein's unified field theory and refused to work with him on it.

After he *retired*, his last two years were an awful downhill slide. First, his wife underwent major surgery; then he refused treatment for a severe prostate condition. Finally, he fell into deep depression and paranoia. Terrified that his food would be poisoned, he died of self-*starvation*.

Yet his work in philosophy and math repositioned our sense of self. Before Gödel, mathematicians thought they were standing at the door of absolute truth. Now it was clear that math, like science, was limited. After Gödel, we were both *humbled* and liberated. Our ambitions were *carved* back to human dimensions.

Gödel practiced a kind of Pangloss optimism. He looked for an afterlife. And one biographer, who knew him personally, quoted him as having said: „Our total reality and total existence are beautiful and meaningful.“ Perhaps that's why, despite his own dark journey, he left us all *saner* than we'd been before him. ■

**Kurt Gödel war einer der bemerkenswertesten Mathematiker des 20. Jahrhunderts. Herr Warum, wie ihn seine Familie nannte, zeigte der Mathematik ihre Grenzen auf.**



<i>arcane</i>	obskur
<i>axiom</i>	Grundsatz
<i>blackboard</i>	Tafel
<i>carve, to</i>	schneiden, zerschneiden
<i>consistent</i>	stetig, gleich bleibend
<i>devastate, to</i>	vernichten
<i>edgy</i>	nervös, kribbelig
<i>haul off, to</i>	wegzerren, abschleppen
<i>humble, to</i>	bescheiden, demütig
<i>incompleteness</i>	Unvollständigkeit
<i>institutionalize, to</i>	in eine Anstalt einweisen
<i>noose</i>	Schlinge
<i>recurrent</i>	wiederkehrend
<i>remarkable</i>	bemerkenswert
<i>retire, to</i>	in Ruhestand gehen
<i>saner</i>	gesünder
<i>severe</i>	schwerwiegend
<i>starvation</i>	Verhungern, Entkräftung
<i>thesis</i>	Doktorarbeit

Dieser Text von Prof. Dr. John Lienhard ist Teil der Radioserie „Engines of Our Ingenuity“ und wird hier mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Autors und der Radiostation KUHF wiedergegeben. Den Originaltext und weitere 1900 Kurzberichte über die Geschichte der Technik finden Sie unter [www.uh.edu/engines](http://www.uh.edu/engines)