

# Mittag-Leffler as I remember him

by

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As one of the few surviving mathematicians who can remember Mittag-Leffler personally, I have been requested by the editors of the *Acta* to write down my memories for this volume. In 1927 I spent a month in his company at his beautiful villa in Djursholm. I owe him a debt of gratitude: when I took my leave from him he offered to publish my thesis in the *Acta*. A few months later he was dead; perhaps mine was thus the last paper which he accepted, sight unseen, for publication. His successor Nørlund made good his promise.

First it must be explained how I came to visit him. Soon after World War I, Henri Villat, by his personal charm and his ability to get along with people, had achieved a high position in French mathematics. In 1922 he was made the editor of the renowned *Journal de Liouville* and retained that editorship, or rather managed to cling to it, for a full half-century. In 1925 he was put in charge of the newly created series of monographs, the *Mémorial des Sciences Mathématiques*, somewhat misguidedly set up to rival the German *Enzyklopädie der mathematischen Wissenschaften*, and went on directing it until the *Mémorial's* demise and his own in 1972. It was of course part of Mittag-Leffler's way of life to be on cordial terms with such personalities.

In 1925 Mittag-Leffler, impressed by Hilbert's writings on mathematical logic, and mindful of the lustre he had brought to the *Acta* in earlier days by printing Georg Cantor's most important papers in a French version, wished for Hilbert's latest article *Über das Unendliche* to be similarly translated for publication in the *Acta*. Through Villat I was offered this task; the article, *Sur l'infini*, came out in the winter of 1926 in one of the three volumes dedicated to Mittag-Leffler on his eightieth anniversary.

Later in the same year Villat told me that he had once extracted a promise from Mittag-Leffler for a monograph on polynomial series expansions, to be included in the *Mémorial*. A young Frenchman had been sent to assist in the writing of that monograph; with characteristic optimism Villat had somehow formed the impression that a draft had been prepared and that little was needed to bring it to perfection. He knew