

Fame, wealth doesn't add up for math genius

Russian hermit turns down honours, \$1M

BY ANDREW OSBORN, DAILY TELEGRAPH MARCH 27, 2010 10:00 PM

He has been called "the cleverest man in the world" and shook academia to its foundations when he announced that he had solved a fiendish mathematical problem that had baffled the planet's best brains for a century.

Yet Grigory Perelman, a 43 year-old Russian mathematician, has spurned plaudits and wealth to subsist like a hermit.

He lives in a two-bedroom flat with his elderly mother in a dilapidated Soviet-era tower block in St. Petersburg and last week he proved again -- in spectacular fashion -- that he rejects society's norms.

Picking up the telephone, the bearded genius, who is jobless, found himself being offered an academic prize worth \$1 million US.

He politely but tersely told the American institute offering it that he would have to consider whether he wanted to accept the money or not. "He said he would let me know at some point," said Jim Carlson, the president of the Clay Mathematics Institute. "He did not give a sense of timing but I do not expect it will be tomorrow. It is not every day that a person even entertains turning down a million dollars."

The Russian has refused high honours before. In 2006, he was offered and declined the Fields Medal, the mathematical world's equivalent of a Nobel Prize. He said he was "not interested in money or fame" and did not want "everybody looking at me like I'm a creature in a zoo."

Sir John Ball, the man given the job of getting him to accept the medal, remembers walking the streets of St. Petersburg for two days trying in vain to get him to say yes. "He did not want the attention. His reason was that he felt alienated from the mathematical community," he said.

In fact, Perelman's extraordinary life story is a tale of adversity and extremes. He has suffered anti-Semitism as well as betrayal from less talented colleagues. Disillusioned, he effectively withdrew from society about five years ago.

It was not always thus. "Grisha" as he is known to his friends, was born in 1966 in what was then Leningrad, at the peak of the Soviet era.

His mother, Ludmila, was a talented mathematician, and his father Yakov, who now lives in Israel, was a prominent engineer. Grisha's talents were noticed before he reached 11. He was enrolled at an elite mathematics school. "In 1981, he became the best of his age in the Soviet Union," recalls Sergey Rukshin, the director of the school.

Rukshin remembers how, at 14, Perelman devoted himself wholly to mathematics, even putting aside his beloved violin. "It was very important for him to be number one," he said. Perelman obtained a PhD at Leningrad university before securing a position at a top institute. In the late 1980s he moved to the United States to conduct research at top universities.

American colleagues remember his fingernails being unusually long as well as his eccentricity, and the frugality of his lifestyle. In 1995, he shocked his peers by returning to the poorly funded research institute in St. Petersburg, turning down lucrative offers in the U.S. in favour of a salary worth \$200 a month.

In 2002 and 2003 he had quietly published the answer to the Poincare conjecture, which involved proving a hypothesis about three dimensional space and which academics believe could further our understanding of how the universe is structured.

It took four years for teams of academics around the world to check Perelman's solution, but eventually they confirmed that he had cracked something many had thought was unsolvable.

Neighbours say he now spends his days playing table tennis against a wall. Every day he walks to a grocery store at 1:30 p.m. where he buys the same things: eggs, cheese, spaghetti, sour cream, bread and oranges.

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