# POLYA

1887 - 1985

Let me introduce to you George Polya, notable for being the first mathematician in the series who sounds like a 2D shape. He was a very nice Hungarian bloke, though got a bit fed up with Europe in the Second World War (who wouldn’t have?) and emigrated to America in 1940. He was a big fan of problem solving and his many books have had a major influence on the way that maths is taught today.

George was born in Budapest in 1885 and permanently exasperated his mother by having more energy than she could cope with. He was an expert football player, champion wrestler and moved furniture for fun. This particularly annoyed his mother. Mr Polya was also very keen on walking and never owned a car during his 98-year life. He had a similar energy and enthusiasm for study and started six different subjects at university before finally settling on mathematics.

After graduating from the University of Budapest, Polya became a lecturer there and was very popular with his students. However, on one occasion he accidentally tested this to the limit. While walking in the woods, he happened upon two of his students involved in a romantic tryst. Polya was most embarrassed and walked off in the other direction, but ten minutes later bumped into them again. Unbelievably, and despite desperate attempts otherwise, he found them for a third time later in the same morning. Embarrassed beyond what he thought possible, he went home and invented the ‘random-walk problem’.

This was just one of the famous problems that is typical of the work of Hungarian mathematicians. Locked away behind the iron curtain, with no contact with the rest of the mathematical world they invented new ways of thinking about and teaching maths. With the fall of Communism these ideas have spread throughout Europe, and much of the teaching and learning that happens in our classrooms today is based on what George and his friends invented. Hooray!

Incidentally, Polya was renowned for his sense of humour. He loved to enter brainteasers in an American maths magazine every April Fool’s day and went under the name ‘Professor Euclide Paracelso Bobasto Umbugio of Guayazuela’. As far as made up names go, this is the best I have ever heard.