

## A FEW WORDS IN CONCLUSION\*

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When my teacher and friend Andrzej Trautman asked me to write concluding remarks for the Proceedings of the Mathisson Conference, I must confess that I felt a bit lost. An old memory came almost immediately before my eyes, the Albert Einstein centenary conference in 1979 in Jerusalem, Israel. There were many extraordinary speakers at that meeting, including Paul Dirac, Alfred Kastler, Max Dresden, Steven Weinberg, Murray Gell-Mann, Yuval Ne'eman, to name just a few; all excellent and original physicists, some of them giving first-hand impressions of Einstein's work and personality.

But to conclude the meeting, the organizers have chosen Sir Isaiah Berlin, a renowned literary critic and philosopher, who from the very beginning confessed that he was unable to follow any of Einstein's scientific papers. Nevertheless he gave a brilliant talk, full of deep and witty thoughts concerning Einstein's personality and influence he exerted on his contemporaries.

My situation is better, because I am able not only to read and appreciate Mathisson's scientific papers, but also to imagine his life in Warsaw in the beginning of the twentieth century. My late father was only ten years younger than Mathisson, and, in the late twenties, he studied Latin and Greek philology in the then Polish town Lwów. Coming from a very modest Jewish family, he earned his living with private lessons like Mathisson in his student years.

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Life was not easy in those times for anybody, and Jewish life in particular; nevertheless, thinking of Mathisson's fate, I could paraphrase the title of one of Hemingway's novels saying that Myron Mathisson's life was short and happy, although this statement may seem ironical. But it is not.

Upon reading the excellent and moving biography prepared for these proceedings by Tilman Sauer and Andrzej Trautman, one is struck by a number of lucky coincidences and events, each of which seems to be crucial for the subsequent Mathisson's way to great science. Let me point out some of them.

- He was lucky to have been born in an educated Jewish family and to have learned many languages as his own: Hebrew, Russian, German and French; I suppose that English came later. Without these linguistic skills he would never be able to write such a moving letter to Einstein with genuine literary quality French. (I am sure that his French was then better than Einstein's.)
- He was lucky to live in liberated Poland after the First World War, when a Jew could continue University studies after getting a High School diploma;
- He was lucky to be relegated from the Polytechnic, because after interruption of studies due to his army service and participation in the war against the Bolshevik invasion, he resumed his studies entering Warsaw University;
- He was lucky to meet an excellent and magnanimous teacher in the person of Professor Czesław Białobrzewski, who recognized his talent for physics and encouraged him to work in the chosen direction;
- He was lucky that Einstein recognized the quality of his work at once and used his influence to give Mathisson and his scientific work an invaluable backing;
- He luckily escaped Soviet Union in 1937, leaving all his papers and books in Kazan. A few months more, and he could have ended his life in Soviet prison, as thousands of foreigners did;
- He was lucky to be able to return to Cracow in 1937 and to work with Jan Weyssenhoff, and be outside of Poland in 1939 when the German invasion started the Second World War;
- Finally, he was lucky to die at the beginning of that war, so that the knowledge of the terrible reality of the Holocaust and the loss of almost all his family and friends was spared to him.

Thinking of Myron Mathisson's short and intense life, with its unique mix of tragedy and extraordinary luck, I cannot refrain myself from citing an old Hassidic story, which I am sure Mathisson have heard, too.

When Rabbi Zussia was very old and so weak that he could not get out of bed, he knew that his days were few. He called his beloved students to his bedside and told them in a very soft but clear voice: "During all my life, I tried to be as righteous as Moses, as holy as his brother Aaron the high priest, as clever as Joseph and as wise as King Solomon. And now my days are few and soon I will be called upon the highest court in front of the Lord. I fear the judgement; but there is one thing I know for sure: the Almighty cannot blame me for not having been Moses or King David or King Solomon during my lifetime. But He could blame me for not being Rabbi Zussia".

It is quite clear that Myron Mathisson could say, after Rabbi Zussia, that although he was not among the greatest physicists of his time, he certainly accomplished his own and unique destiny, which cannot be mistaken for any other one. The originality of his scientific heritage echoes the exceptional and unique human experience. Perhaps this is one of the reasons of the lasting influence Mathisson's works have left in General Relativity and Mathematical Physics.

The best testimony of this influence is provided by the names of people with whom he exchanged scientific correspondence or collaborated: Białobrzski, Einstein, Hadamard, Dirac, Levi-Civita, Weyssenhoff. Then come the names of scientists who continued to work in the spirit of Mathisson's ideas and approaches: Weyssenhoff, Papapetrou, and their students; Tulczyjew, Havas and many others.

Finally, as a "third circle", we can cite the names of the speakers and participants at this meeting, among which there were also many young people. The quality of their contributions, included in these proceedings, speaks for itself.

The Warsaw Mathisson Conference is the best tribute for a scientist one could imagine — a living proof of the validity of his ideas and accomplishment. And the fact that it took place in his native country is in itself significant and gives Mathisson a posthumous recognition from his homeland.