Memories of the First Icelandic Fellow at Nordita 1958-1960

Magnús Magnússon

After studying physics and mathematics at the University of Cambridge and working on the calculation of wave functions using the first computer in England, EDSAC1, I spent a year at Princeton University. Coming back to Iceland the situation was very different from Cambridge and Princeton. There was no physics department at the University of Iceland, only physics courses in the first part of the (Danish) engineering studies. I attended the first UN Conference on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy in 1955 as a representative of Iceland and became director of the Icelandic Nuclear Science Committee which was established the following year. I was fortunate to get a fellowship at Nordita in 1958.

I arrived in Copenhagen in the autumn of 1958 with my family. Nordita had arranged for me to rent a house in Sorgenfri, on the same street where Aage Bohr and family lived. We got to know Aage and Marietta Bohr well and the children of both families could play together. Around 1970 Aage and Marietta came with their son Thomas and daughter Margarethe to Iceland. My wife and I took them to the site of Njals saga. At a spot where a fateful event occurred in the saga we had a picnic and Aage read aloud about this event from a copy of Njals saga from which Niels Bohr had read to his children

I had long been interested in General Relativity but had not had the opportunity to follow up that interest. At Nordita, however, I got the opportunity to work with Christian Møller on the energy-momentum complex in General Relativity. This gave me the opportunity to attend conferences on General Relativity during my stay at Nordita and after I returned to Iceland. At these conferences, I met many scientists whom I would not have met otherwise and the lectures gave me a good overview of research in General Relativity.

The atmosphere at Nordita and the Niels Bohr Institute was scientifically very stimulating due to the staff, fellows and visiting scientists from all over the world, some Nobel Laureates and some Nobel Laureates-to-be. Of the former were Werner Heisenberg, P.A.M. Dirac, Julian Schwinger and Abdus Salam, whom I had known in Cambridge. Once during Heisenberg´s visit I was standing on Blegdamsvej waiting for a tram when I saw him in Niels Bohr's office and Bohr walking around the room. I then recalled the story of their famous meeting, probably in the same office, during WWII, which Aage Bohr had told me about.

The social life at Nordita and the Niels Bohr Institute was most enjoyable, both at the Institute and in private homes, e.g. at Aage Bohr's home and Christian Møller's home, where I had the pleasure to meet Werner Heisenberg. One event was particularly memorable. That was the Christmas party for families of foreign scientists held at the "Carlsberg Æresbolig" where Niels Bohr spent much time showing the children the magnificent Christmas tree while Margarethe Bohr entertained the parents.

Back in Iceland I got a position at the University of Iceland and was given the task of setting up the Computing Centre at the University, among other things. When the Science Institute had been established at the University in 1966, of which I became director, and a B.S. programme in physics and other subjects was set up, the physics community started

slowly to grow with the staff at the Science Institute and gradual increase in the number of physics students.

When I became a member of the Nordita Board in 1973 Nils Robert Nilsson, Helle KIllerich and I arranged for members of the Nordita staff and visiting scientists to come to Iceland and give lectures at the University. Of the Nordita staff I can mention Bengt Strömgren, Christian Møller, Aage Bohr, Ben Mottelson, Chris Pethick, Alan Luther and Nils Robert Nilsson. Of the visiting scientists I can mention Gordon Baym, Thomas Gold, Peter Havas, Donald Q. Lamb, William H. Press and Herbert Schnopper. These visits and lectures were most stimulating for the small scientific community in Iceland and encouraged some physics students to go abroad for further studies, some getting a fellowship at Nordita. When they came back to Iceland they got positions at the Science Institute and eventually were appointed to positions at the University. Thus one can safely say that Nordita had an important part In building up studies and research in physics in Iceland.