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Maths genius living in poverty

Nadejda Lobastova and Michael Hirst in St Petersburg, Russia
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A MATHS genius who won fame last week for apparently spurning a million-dollar prize is living with his mother in a humble flat in St Petersburg, co-existing on her \$74-a-month pension, because he has been unemployed since December.

Grigory "Grisha" Perelman stunned the maths world when he revealed in 2002 his solution to a century-old puzzle known as the Poincare Conjecture.

But friends say he cannot afford to travel to the International Mathematics Union's convention in Madrid, where his peers want him to receive the maths equivalent of the Nobel Prize tomorrow, but is too modest to ask anyone to underwrite his trip.

His present predicament stems from a rancorous split with a leading Russian mathematical institute, the Steklov Institute in St Petersburg, which failed to re-elect him as a member in 2003. Dr Perelman, 40, was made to feel an "absolutely ungifted and untalented person", a friend said. He suffered a crisis of confidence and cut himself off.

Interviewed in St Petersburg last week, Dr Perelman insisted he was unworthy of all the attention, and was uninterested in his windfall. "I do not think anything that I say can be of the slightest public interest," he said.

"I am not saying that because I value my privacy, or that I am doing anything I want to hide. There are no top-secret projects going on here. I just believe the public has no interest in me."

Dr Perelman also said he had no interest in self promotion. "I do not regard it as a positive thing. I realised this a long time ago and nobody is going to change my mind," he said.

"Newspapers should be more discerning over who they write about. They should have more taste. As far as I am concerned I can't offer anything for their readers."

Dr Perelman has some savings from his time as a lecturer but is apparently reluctant to supplement them with the \$US1 million (\$1.3 million) offered by the Clay Mathematics Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for solving one of the world's seven "millennium problems".

Friends say evidence of Dr Perelman's innate modesty came when - having finally solved the problem after more than 10 years' work - he simply posted his conclusion on the internet, rather than publishing his explanation in a recognised journal.

"If anybody is interested in my way of solving the problem, it's all there - let them go and read about it," Dr Perelman said.

"I have published all my calculations. This is what I can offer the public."

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