LETTERS

Paul Erdös: Addenda

The portrait by Gina Bari Kolata of mathematician Paul Erdös (News and Comment, 8 Apr., p. 144) as a man totally devoted to his subject is very well done but lacks a few important details. Although Erdös' devotion to his subject is unlimited, it is not correct to say that his entire attention is given to mathematics. Those who know Erdös well would probably agree that he is also eternally inquisitive and well informed about social, political, cultural, and general scientific matters. All these interests do not detract from his constant preoccupation with mathematics. I recall a long-past incident that illustrates the point. It occurred during a chess game between Erdös and a colleague, who was known as a masterful chess player. As I walked by I saw Erdös' opponent in deep thought about his next move, while Erdös himself seemed to pore over an encyclopedia of medicine that he was holding in his lap. When I asked him what he was studying, he answered, "Please, do not interrupt. I am proving a theorem."

Kolata says that Erdös has never had a regular appointment at a university. However, he did have a research instructorship at Purdue from 1943 to 1945, and later he was a member of the mathematics department at Notre Dame. The scientific community should be informed why his affiliation with Notre Dame was terminated. Late in the summer of 1954, Erdös wished to attend the International Congress of Mathematicians (a quadrennial event), which was meeting in Amsterdam that year. As an alien resident he had to apply for a reentry visa that would allow him to return to the United States after the congress. His request for the visa was rejected, although the administration of Notre Dame claimed him as an essential member of its faculty. He had lengthy hearings with immigration and FBI officials and learned that a voluminous file had been accumulated on his occasional expressions of sympathy for and monetary contributions to various causes, his signing of petitions, his correspondence with foreign mathematicians, and other matters. Erdös decided that he would rather give up the security that he enjoyed at that time than to have his right to travel so arbitrarily restricted. He left the United States officially still on leave from Notre Dame but was not permitted to return. In subsequent years he tried to get a visitor's visa to attend meetings, symposia, and conferences in the United States; his requests were supported by frequent petitions of colleagues, professional organizations, and even U.S. senators. His requests were rejected again and again. I received a letter from him (in 1961 or 1962) saying that he had at last obtained the promise of an American consul that he would receive the visa shortly, but a few weeks later he had to cancel his visit; the promise was disavowed. In his typical style he wrote that the foreign policy of the State Department was adamant on two points: nonadmission of Red China to the United Nations and of Paul Erdös to the United States. Finally, in 1963, he was allowed to attend the annual meeting of the American Mathematical Society in Boulder, Colorado, and to visit several campuses. He also came to Purdue to give a colloquium lecture. The audience included an unusually large number of students who had came to see and greet the famous man. Erdös prefaced his talk with the words: "Sam [the United States] finally admitted me because he thinks I am too old and decrepit now to overthrow him."

It is a sad commentary on our time and country that this man—so totally immersed in scholarly work, so remote from the political arena, a free spirit who lives by the highest moral standards—could be harassed by bureaucrats in high positions whose duty it is to protect our freedoms.

MICHAEL GOLOMB
Division of Mathematical Sciences,
Purdue University,
West Lafayette, Indiana 47907

World Hunger

Deborah Shapley's article about the Antarctic krill (News and Comment, 29 Apr., p. 503) is welcome, and one hopes a new treaty to provide sound management of this marine resource will be concluded *before* commercial fishing for krill gets under way.

It would help greatly, however, if all of us who discuss these needs were more alert to the presumably unconscious determinism involved in such phraseology as Shapley's "the realities of a resource-hungry world" or Gerard Bertrand's "The world need for protein will require the utilization of krill."

These "givens" obscure more significant underlying realities in need of institutional analysis and modification. Why this world hunger? Overpopulation as an answer has become a cliché; it subverts deeper probes. The most neglected sig-