It is not uncommon to read that the first computer was the MARK I, or the Harvard-IBM machine, or perhaps ENIAC; but it is seldom stated that the IBM Selective Sequence-Controlled Electronic Calculator (SSEC) alone can claim this distinction. There is the same uncertainty in dating the first formulations of the main concepts of what we now call computer science—multiprogramming, operating systems, teleprocessing, programming languages, and so on. There are at least two reasons for this. The definitions of the concepts can vary from one writer to another, and it is often difficult to select from the multitude of facts relating to these concepts the one or the few that indicate the origins of the most significant developments.

It seemed to me that it would be interesting to give an account of the history of the computer and of computer science that, while addressed to the nonspecialist, would define these concepts as precisely as possible and, taking the majority view of the knowledgeable writers, would assign dates to first formulations. Thus the book is not simply a history of one particular technology; it is also an exposition of the main ideas and concepts to which this technology has given rise. As a work of popularization, it may give to the reader who does not work in the field of computers some familiarity with the subject. As a history, it may give the specialist a better feeling for the origins of this subject.

The bibliography of so broad a subject could fill several volumes; the bibliographical entries given here are works actually cited in or having a direct bearing on the text.

Translator's note: Certain conventions have been adopted for this edition. First, author's notes are cited by superscripts 1, 2, 3, . . . ; translator's notes, by superscripts a, b, c, . . . ; both author's and translator's notes appear at the back of the book. Second, text in square brackets is an insertion by the translator.
Before concluding this preface, I should like to thank all those who have given me so much help, whether in reading and criticizing my text or in providing me with documents.