

Foreword

Émile Borel is one of those foremost scientists whose name rings so many bells to the ears of mathematicians while being almost unknown to the general public, save for those people who live in the French town of Saint-Affrique. There the hospital, in particular, is named after him. Not that he was a medical doctor nor was he involved in medicine. He was in fact the mayor of the town when the hospital was built, and it is far from being the only construction he can be credited with.

Borel was indeed a builder, among many other facets of his personality. He also constructed, and ran as director until his death, the Institut Henri Poincaré in Paris. When I took over the direction of this famous and internationally renowned house of mathematics, the fact that it had been founded by Borel was quite impressive.

So, I am honoured and delighted to have contributed a little bit to the publication of this volume, thanks to the links we have been developing with European Mathematical Society Press, which now publishes two of the four journals stemming from the original *Annales de l'Institut Henri Poincaré*.

As far as I know, this is the first book ever written in English about Borel, even though one can have a glimpse of his life, for instance, in the book *Mathematicians at war: Volterra and his French colleagues in World War I* by Laurent Mazliak and Rossana Tazzioli.

In fact, the few historians of mathematics interested in Borel have long refrained from writing down his biography. Hélène Gispert even wrote a paper (in French) in 2012 to explain their reasons. A biography of Borel would be too difficult a story telling, with too many choices to

be made within his numerous intellectual, mathematical, and political commitments, let alone the classical danger of instrumentalisation of his character.

Nevertheless, Gispert accepted to curate an exhibition about him at the Institut Henri Poincaré library in 2021. Entitled *Émile Borel, un mathématicien au pluriel*, it was designed to avoid the pitfalls she had pointed out in her paper, and reflects her suggestion to focus on specific topics, and actually also on specific years in the life of the Borels, with information about his wife and writer Camille Marbo being showcased along with those about him. Thanks to our librarians and this group of historians, in particular Martha Cecilia Bustamante, the exhibition's material was soon translated into Spanish and shown in Cali in Colombia, where Borel is a hero. In addition, we also published a booklet (in French) about the exhibition together with the Société Mathématique de France.

Back in 1999, the biography written in French by the physicist and Borel enthusiast Pierre Guiraldencq filled a gap in a way that was not competed with until Michel Pinault's monumental work entitled *Émile Borel : une carrière intellectuelle sous la IIIe République*. Today we are lucky enough to have a widely renewed version of Pierre Guiraldencq's book in English, thanks to the joint work of the author and the translator Arturo Sangalli.

I wish this book be enjoyed by a wide audience, ranging from professional mathematicians or historians to students and the general public. We will surely be proud to display it on the shelves of the Institut Henri Poincaré library.

Paris

Sylvie Benzoni