

Roman Kałuza, Ann Kostant, and Wojbor Woyczyński, *Through a Reporter's Eyes: The Life of Stefan Banach*, Birkhäuser Boston, 1996. x + 137 pp.

Reviewed by

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Mathematical biographies come in all flavors. Such a book might be written by a historian, a mathematician, or a journalist. According to authors' different professional perspectives as well as individual traits, biographies of the same person can vary widely in content, methodology, writing style, and so on. But certain universal standards apply. At the very least, the information presented should be accurate, and the sources of the information should be properly acknowledged and identified.

Sadly, *The Life of Stefan Banach* does not meet even these minimal criteria. This is particularly unfortunate, as the unusual genesis of the book held such promise. In 1992 the journalist and science editor Roman Kałuza published, in Poland, a biography of Banach. The mathematician Wojbor Woyczyński and Birkhäuser's Ann Kostant then prepared the translation/revision under review. According to Woyczyński and Kostant, their contribution involved "extensive reorganizing, editing, and rewriting (with the author's benevolent permission) as well as the substantial addition of new relevant material". Theoretically, the authors' combined reportorial, mathematical, and editorial expertise should have produced a solid piece of work, instead of the flawed book that actually resulted.

And the flaws are many. The most disturbing of them is that many passages are too close for comfort to the previously published writings of others. For example, consider this characterization of Włodzimierz Stozek: "Stozek, cheerful, rotund, short, and completely bald, was Chairman of the Department of General Studies. The word *stozek* means 'a cone' in Polish; he looked more like a sphere." Now take the following sentence: "Although his name means 'a cone' in Polish, he looked more like a ball — rotund,

small, and completely bald.” The former quotation appears in Stan Ulam’s 1976 autobiography *Adventures of a Mathematician*, the latter in *The Life of Stefan Banach*. Or compare these two descriptions of the category method: “[I]t showed that sometimes it was easier to prove that *most* objects have a certain property than to exhibit a particular example” versus. “It demonstrated that sometimes it is easier to show that *most* of the objects have a certain property than to produce a single example of such an object.” The former comes from Mark Kac’s “A Personal History of the Scottish Book,” contained in *The Scottish Book* (ed. R. Daniel Mauldin), the latter from Woyczyński’s appendix to the Banach book. In these and several other examples, the original works are not even credited as being the sources of information, much less the prototypes for the wording.

Even when the contributions of others do receive credit, the attributions are often inexcusably sloppy. Not just sloppy by the standards of scholarly treatises, but frustratingly incomplete even for members of the general audience who might want to do a little follow-up reading. For instance, at one point a passage from the Kac article mentioned above *is* presented as a quotation from Kac. But no indication is given that the passage occurs in Mauldin’s book. A reader would surely assume that the quotation is a translation from the only item by Kac listed in the bibliography — an article in the journal *Wiadomości Matematyczne*. To take another example, *The Life of Stefan Banach* often quotes Andrzej Turowicz, even devoting more than a full page to a selection from his memoirs. But the bibliography contains nothing at all by Turowicz. Have his memoirs even been published? Have they been translated into English? The book gives no clue. These lapses, along with others of a similar nature, do little for the book’s credibility.

To make matters worse, *The Life of Stefan Banach* is studded with errors, both historical and mathematical. Misstatements particularly abound in Woyczyński’s appendix. Within the span of a few short pages there, Hilbert’s list loses three problems, Gödel’s lifespan gains fourteen years, and Descartes gets displaced by a century. Nor does the main text lack its share of blunders, such as the statement (with errors of both omission and commission!) that the linear transformations of Euclidean spaces are the translations, rotations, and reflections.

Obviously, Kałuża cannot be faulted for Woyczyński’s appendix. Since I do not read Polish, I am in no position to tell how many of the book’s other flaws stem from Kałuża’s work and how many from its revision by Kostant and Woyczyński. But regardless of where the blame belongs, *The Life of Stefan Banach* is a real disappointment. One would do much better to read the autobiographies of Ulam and Kac than this pastiche.