

# Preface to the English Edition

## To the reader

This biography of the Finnish American mathematician Lars Ahlfors (1907–1996) is a slightly modified translation of my Finnish biography, which was published in the spring of 2013. That book was not intended only for members of the scientific community, but for any reader with an interest in science or scientists.

Mathematics could not be ignored, as it was the leading theme of Lars Ahlfors' life. But since the book was not aimed at mathematicians only, I refrained from going into detail and restricted my description to Ahlfors' impact on the development of complex analysis in the twentieth century.

The book was intended to prevent Lars Ahlfors from slipping into oblivion in Finland. It was surprisingly well received and has gone into a second edition.

The majority of readers of the English edition are probably non-Finnish mathematicians. For that reason I have removed passages of interest primarily to Finns, while adding a bit more to the portion of mathematics and to the Finnish history relating to Ahlfors' life.

There exists an excellent source of Ahlfors' mathematical works: Birkhäuser's extensive *Lars Valerian Ahlfors: Collected Papers*, Volume I, 1929–1955, and Volume II, 1954–1979, published in 1982. With only a few exceptions, it comprises Ahlfors' complete mathematical production. In addition it contains historical background to his studies as well as Ahlfors' own comments on almost every work.

There is also a lot to tell about Ahlfors other than his mathematics. His life was marked by political events, in particular World War II, and he was a colorful personality, which brought about many stories about him. Narrating them is limited by source criticism and the risk of giving a distorted image of his person. Lars Ahlfors was above all a hardworking toiler whose diligence was fueled by his love for mathematics.

## Acknowledgements

Interest on the part of the American Mathematical Society (AMS) in an English edition of the biography of Ahlfors was first expressed by AMS Executive Director Donald E. McClure. He advised me to contact Senior Editor Edward Dunne. I do not know what party gave the decisive go-ahead to publish, but in any case the interaction with Edward Dunne proceeded well. Later, Dunne was followed by Sergei Gelfand, the head of the book department of the AMS. Marcia Almeida and Arlene O'Sean also had an active part in the editing of the English Ahlfors biography.

Arranging the translation remained my concern. The publisher of the Finnish book, the Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, said they would be only pleased if

the book were to appear in English, and the University of Helsinki gave me without hesitation the permission to publish the English book and to use all required Ahlfors material in its possession. For covering the translation costs I turned to the Niilo Helander Foundation since its founder, Niilo Helander, was Lars Ahlfors' uncle. The funding decision came through in short order thanks to the chair of the Helander Foundation, my friend the historian Matti Klinge.

The first English text was produced by William Hellberg, an American translator of Finnish ancestry. By the agreement prepared by the AMS, I am also a translator. I am greatly indebted to William Hellberg because it was not difficult for me to revise his English text, and the end result was better than it would have been if I had translated the book alone from Finnish.

In Finland my foremost assistant was my son Erkki Lehto. He played an important role in preparing the illustrations, most of which are the same in the Finnish and English books, and was actively participating at the final stage in the editing of the book. Erkki took some photographs himself, searched for pictures on the Internet, clarified the permissions of their use, and prepared all into printable form. The majority of the pictures are from Ahlfors' daughters, who donated them to the University of Helsinki.

From Finns I also received assistance from Axel Ahlfors Jr., Bengt Ahlfors, Carl G. Gahmberg, Mats Gyllenberg, Martti Helminen, Aimo Hinkkanen, Leena Lehto, Olli Martio, Susanna Pennanen, Eini and Seppo Rickman, Dan-Olof Riska, Mika Seppälä, Olli Tammi, Jaana Tegelberg, Urpo Vento, Iikko Voipio, and John Westerholm. For details, I refer to my Finnish Ahlfors biography.

Concerning the half-century Lars Ahlfors lived in the United States, Lars' daughters Vanessa Gruen and Caroline Mouris as well as Caroline's husband, Frank Mouris, have been an irreplaceable source of information. They responded promptly and tirelessly to many specific questions that came to me as I was working on the book. Especially with Vanessa Gruen countless emails have crossed the Atlantic. Information has also been provided by the mathematicians David Drasin, Peter Duren, and Albert Marden from the United States and from Lennart Carleson and Ari Laptev from Sweden.

My heartfelt thanks goes to all who participated in producing the English edition of my Ahlfors biography.

Helsinki  
April 2015  
Olli Lehto