Reminiscences of Mirek Plavec

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Except for those of you who knew Mirek before he left what was then Czechoslovakia, I believe I have known him longer than anyone else on this continent – for the simple reason that I knew him before either he or I supposed that we would come to live on this continent, or had visited it, or even knew that we were going to visit it. He came to Manchester while I was still a graduate student, anxious to leave the field of meteorite studies, which was one of the specialities of Czech astronomy at the time, and to begin the study of close binaries. Zdeněk Kopal, my supervisor, made clear that he expected me to show Mirek around the city and the University, and that was one of the good turns that Kopal did me, because thus began a friendship that has lasted ever since – well over 40 years now. Ironically, as I found during this past summer at the IAU General Assembly, I have now been away from Manchester so long that I get lost myself in both the city and the University!

One of the first questions Mirek asked me was one I could not answer. In fact, I can rarely answer his questions, since he knows much more about close binaries than I do, but this question was an easy one, not astronomical at all. Mirek, perhaps with some sixth sense about where he would spend much of his life, wanted to know the full name of Los Angeles. Until then, it had never occurred to me that Los Angeles wasn't the full name. I muttered something about the name being Spanish (as if he didn't know) and meaning "the Angels" but Mirek was insistent. "Los", he told me, was the genitive plural and the two words meant "of the Angels"; somewhere he had seen the full name but couldn't remember it. Years later, I found the full name – in the AAA California Tour Guide! – "El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles". I suppose Mirek has known that long since, but I wonder if any of us would be here if California had remained a part of Mexico and this institution was known as UCPNSRLA? (Since our meeting, Mirek has pointed out to me that the original name was even longer, but this version is given also in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.)

Even in those Manchester days, Mirek impressed me with the ability of Czechs to control the weather. He told me about a meteorologist friend in Czechoslovakia who had a visit in his office one day from a crank. Apparently, we astronomers are not the only scientists who get visits and communications from cranks. This one said he could control the weather; not, he admitted, all the details of the weather, but on a really bad day, he could clear things up. The meteorologist bided his time until a day of pouring rain that was forecast to last all day. He phoned the crank and invited him round to demonstrate his powers. They went to the roof of the building, rain pouring down on them. The crank looked up at the clouds and scowled at them; then he raised his fist and shook it at the sky. In a few minutes the rain stopped, a little later, some blue sky appeared – and after about half an hour it was fine and the Sun shone for the rest of the day! Now, Mirek can control weather, too. He is, after all, the only person in living memory to have directly caused a rainstorm in the Sahara desert! That, of course was not exactly what he wanted – Mirek and the crank are, you might say, Bohemian counterparts of particle and anti-particle! – but Mirek's method was remarkably simple and elegant: he simply went there to observe S Equulei! Indeed, I strongly suspect that the most cost-effective way to prevent the southward extension of the Sahara would be to build a series of telescopes along the southern boundary, all devoted to the observation of S Equulei. But then, it might work only if Mirek could be persuaded to go and use them.

As it happened, I came to this continent first, but Mirek made his first visit not long afterward, in time to attend the 1961 IAU meeting in Berkeley. He liked Victoria and especially R.M. Petrie, then the Director of the DAO, and he paid other visits. He arrived on one of these to find me carefully drawing a scale plan of U Cephei. I had drawn a nice circle to represent the primary and carefully used the tables of Plavec and Kratochvíl to draw in the secondary. I had some idea of being able to draw in the stream between the two from a study of the spectrum at various phases. The idea was not complete nonsense, because with tomography people like Mercedes Richards, not to mention some of you here, are doing just that.

But in those days, we had neither the time resolution nor the computing power to do such work – nor, to be quite honest, did I have the mathematical ability. Nevertheless, Mirek liked the idea and decided he should draw a diagram of his own for another system – probably S Equulei again. He had just got as far as drawing the circle when he decided to stand back and admire his own handiwork; unfortunately, just at that moment Jean Petrie walked in to greet him, and found he had travelled all the way from Prague to Victoria just to draw circles on graph paper! Mirek unaccountably lost interest in scale diagrams of close binary systems after that.

Sometimes, I would go back to Europe. Mirek and I were together at a conference in Brussels in 1966. That was the meeting where Kippenhahn and Weigert published the first calculations of mass-exchange in close binaries. They had stumbled on it by chance, being primarily concerned to find a way of producing white dwarfs and, unfortunately, at that stage, they were not aware of the difference between close binaries and visual binaries, so their important result was presented to an audience many of whose members did not fully understand its significance. I remember going down to the centre of Brussels one evening with Mirek, Jura Grygar and Mario Fracastoro. The tram-ride back was long and slow and Mirek vowed several times that he would never again criticize the trams of Prague. (I do not know if he kept this vow.) On this ride we spoke English, the only language we all had in common, even though I was the only native speaker of it. When we got off, we were approached by an American girl who had heard us speaking on the tram, with the request "Can you tell me the way to the girls' dormitory?" As it happened, we were staying in that very building and Mario Fracastoro, always the gentleman, took off his hat, bowed low, and said with a marked Italian accent "Follow me, I am sleeping there!" She did follow us but, I rather suspect, with some trepidation.

Mirek's last extended visit to Victoria was in 1969 and, as you know, that was the time he took the big decision to stay on this continent. We would have loved to have him and his family at the DAO and I think he would have loved to have stayed but, already, it was becoming hard to find positions. Eventually, after a stay in Columbus Ohio, UCLA gave him a home but I like to think that, by helping him to come to Victoria in that year, I played a small part in bringing him to North America. It was a difficult time, when the whole family had to make a hard decision but, on a lighter note, I remember them all being delighted by the tremendous range of choice of ice cream in Canadian stores!

Some of you will remember the important meeting on close binaries that we had in Cambridge (England) in 1975. We had our closing dinner in Christ's College (the college that Charles Darwin attended) and Mirek and I were in the group that sat with the Master at the High Table. Mirek had the job that I am undertaking now, giving the after-dinner speech. Although I no longer remember a word of it, I know it was a very good speech. Mirek was in full spate when it was time to circulate the second round of port. Those of you brought up on this continent, or even on continental Europe, may not quite realize that the great advantage of attending universities like Oxford and Cambridge is that you learn Really Important Things, like the correct way to pass the port – to the left and only when the Master says you may. Now Mirek was immediately to the Master's left and had so warmed to his theme that he was oblivious to mundane matters like a glass of port. I was sitting opposite the Master who decided that I could be trusted to do the right thing, helped himself to his second glass of port and thrust the decanter across the table to me. Although I did not go to Oxford or Cambridge, I did know to help myself and pass to the left and so the port went halfway round the table and back to the Master. Mirek was still oblivious to all this but that wouldn't have mattered if Bohdan Paczynski hadn't been sitting on my right and feeling the need of a second glass of port himself. He had observed all that had happened and naturally supposed that he could reach across and help himself (after all, he is a theoretician!). The Master was caught in a terrible trap. He couldn't interrupt Mirek but he couldn't let Bohdan pass the port to the right, even though to snatch the decanter back would appear rude. The apparent rudeness was after all a lesser evil than the consequences of the port going round the table the wrong way – the British Empire might have come to a premature end or, at least, the Monarchy might have fallen. Fortunately, at this point Mirek made a rare pause for breath and the Master neatly slid the decanter past him and sent it on its way around the other half of the table. Bohdan eventually got his second glass but I have often wondered if, to this day, he is puzzled about what he did wrong.

On a more serious note, I have another memory of that Cambridge meeting. Mirek and Eva Novotny (also born in Czechoslovakia) and I went down into the city, after the sessions were over to see the sights. It was a very hot day and we would all have liked a cool drink in a sidewalk café – not then common in Cambridge. Having failed to find one anywhere, I espied a policeman in the Market Square and proposed to go across and ask him. Mirek and Eva (even though she had grown up in Britain) were alike horrified at the notion, but I insisted. I, after all, had grown up in Britain and had always been taught to look at policemen as friends. We even had a popular song "If you want to know the time, ask a policeman". In fact, the policeman was very friendly, even jocular and helpful, although he could not direct us to what we wanted. "Oh!" he said "You want something like the Champs Elysées – we don't have anything like that in Cambridge". I began to realize, for the first time, what it must really be like to grow up in a police state. I had another insight more recently when my friend Izold Pustylnik from Estonia confided in me, shortly after Estonia recovered its independence, that for the first time in his life he could walk past a policeman without feeling either frightened or angry. Now Mirek has experienced both the major totalitarian regimes that have disfigured the face of Europe in this century, and he is old enough to remember them both. Probably there were times that he could not dare to hope that he would, in fact, live to see them both pass into history. I know a little of what happened to him under those regimes, and the anguish, of which I have already hinted, that the decision to stay here caused him. Some people would have been embittered by such experiences. But Mirek is not bitter; if he were, we would not all be here to celebrate with him now. Instead, he has come through with a wonderful sense of humour and a deep insight into human nature. Perhaps these are what have made him such a good teacher, and it is as a teacher as well as a friend that we honour him today. I am delighted that Petr Harmanec, a representative of his students in the Czech Republic, is here with us. I wish some of the others I know, Jura Grygar, Svatopluk Kříž, Jiří Horn (who, unfortunately, is no longer with us) and Pavel Mayer, could be here.

I did not know, until Mirek told us this morning, that this year is not only the year of his 75th birthday but also of his and Zdenka's Golden Wedding. I can think of no better way of ending these few reminiscences than to ask you to stand and drink a toast to our friends Zdenka and Mirek.