Remembering Mirek

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Hello and Good Evening!

My name is Jan Dobias, and for a long time I was a student under Mirek here at UCLA; at first as an undergraduate in the mid 1970's and later as a graduate in the late 1970's until mid 1980's. Mirek was in fact my PhD thesis advisor. My speech tonight will be quite short; I just want to say a few words about how I met Mirek for the very first time here in the United States, and then I wish to thank him for all he has done for me as well as congratulate him on his very special birthday.

It all started a long time ago in Czechoslovakia. Just like Mirek I was born in Czechoslovakia and spent part of my life there, 19 years to be exact, before coming to the United States. While growing up there I develeped a strong interest in astronomy. As a young lad of about 12 years or so my parents took me to a show in Prague's planetarium and ever since then I have been fascinated with constellations and stars, the moon, the planets and other celestial objects. Also, at that time, space exploration was beginning; first Sputnik was launched in 1957, later other spacecraft were being launched to the moon and to the planets, and even the first manned spaceflights took place in 1961. It was all very fascinating to me; in fact so much that when I was finishing gymnasium (a middle school similar to a high school here in the United States) I decided to apply to the Charles University in Prague, to its mathematical – physical branch ("Faculty of Mathematics and Physics"), to study astronomy. To this day I still remember undergoing one full day of written and then oral examinations in math and physics in the spring of 1968 just to be admitted to the university.

After successfully passing all the exams I was indeed admitted to the Charles University to begin my studies there in the fall of 1968. At that time, of course, I did not know Mirek who was already a professor of astronomy there. So if things had gone as expected I could have been a student under Mirek at the Charles University in Prague instead of a few years later here in Los Angeles at UCLA. But fate, or should I say, Russian tanks and troops interfered, and the rest is, as it is said, history.

I came with my parents and sister to the United States in early July of 1968 to visit relatives who had emigrated here from Czechoslovakia earlier. Our visit was to last 6 weeks, but just 3 days before we were scheduled to return, it happened. During the night of August-21-1968 Russian tanks and troops invaded Czechoslovakia to suppress a movement called Prague's Spring of Freedom (also being referred to as an attempt to build "socialism with human face"). It was only because of this movement that my family and I were allowed to visit the United States; before that we had not been permitted to go abroad at all, not even to East Germany which was then the most rigid of pro-Soviet countries which almost anyone could visit because its borders were sealed so tightly that no one was able to escape to the west. (That's what being behind the Iron Curtain really meant; you still may remember the most shining example of the Iron Curtain – the Berlin Wall.)

To continue, because of the invasion we did not want to return to an occupied country and so we decided to remain in the United States. During the first couple of years I held a number of odd, manual jobs while trying to learn as much English as possible which unfortunately I did not speak at all at the time when I came here. In the "high school" I attended in Czechoslovakia, no English was taught; Russian was, of course, and also German and French, but no English. Finally, in the fall of 1970, I was admitted to a junior college here in Los Angeles which I attended for 2 years majoring in physics but with a plan to eventually transfer to UCLA. In the fall of 1972 I finally did transfer to UCLA with an intent to major in astronomy. As I was looking into a schedule of astronomy classes that fall I noticed there a name of a professor which looked very much like a Czech name to me – Mirek Plavec; I did not know him or of him at that time but I decided to find out about him. I collected all my courage and one day I bravely went to his office to meet him. As I remember it, I knocked on the door and when he invited me in I entered; Mirek was sitting behind his desk writing something, he looked at me and asked how he could help me. And I said to him in Czech:

"Dobrý den, pane profesore, jak se máte? Dovolte abych se Vám představil, jmenuji se...." ("Good Day Professor, how are you today? Let me introduce myself to you, my name is ...").

He was very surprised, but answered me in Czech which brought me a great relief. We then spent some time getting acquainted, talking to each other in Czech. However, it was not until the following year that Mirek taught one of my undergraduate astronomy classes. Later, in graduate school, I had him as a teacher for 2 graduate courses, and eventually he became my PhD thesis advisor. And that's the story of how I met Mirek here at UCLA instead of at the Charles University in Prague.

As I was getting ready for my speech, I thought that there must have been a lot of funny situations and events that happened during my long association with Mirek some of which I might share here with you tonight; however, nothing particularly funny came to me which I could tell you here because without at least some knowledge of Czech language, all the funny parts would be lost on you. There is, however, one thing (although not a funny one) which I will never forget; and I hope as I describe it here tonight, Mirek won't feel offended. It happened at the end of my very first observing trip with Mirek to Lick Observatory. We finished a three day observing run (taking mostly coude plates with spectra of several interacting binaries using the 120-inch Shane telescope) and were getting ready to catch a PSA flight from San Jose back to Los Angeles. Because the flight was scheduled to leave right after 8 am, we were driving down the mountain that morning right after observing the entire night. It must have been due to lack of sleep and being tired, due to being nervous and anxious, due to too many turns on that famous road from Lick, and quite likely also due to the Lick's "night lunch" special that we suddenly had to pull to one side of the road and stop the car about half way down the mountain. I leaped from the car and went to one side of the road while Mirek headed to the other side, and we both,.... well at least I .... threw up right there. After a few minutes we got back to the car and, without saying a word to each other, continued down the mountain; I don't know about Mirek but I definitely felt much better afterwards, and the rest of the trip back to Los Angeles was uneventful.

Why do I remember this particular not very pleasant incident? Well, there are several reasons why; first of all, many other times when I was observing at Lick alone I drove down that same road by that place in the morning after a full night observing to catch that same PSA flight, but it never happened to me again; secondly, during this particular observing run we took a plate of a blue spectrum of W Serpentis, and I think the exposure time on that plate was something like 5 or 6 hours – the longest exposure I ever had to do. And finally it was the very first time I ever used the 120-inch telescope. So I have been looking at this particular incident, at the end of my observing run, as an initiation into being a real astronomer, and the person who was there with me for that initiation was Mirek...

Now, before I conclude my speech, I would like to say this about Mirek: ever since I met him, he has been a excellent teacher to me (and I still try to model myself after him while doing my own teaching now), a great advisor and supervisor, an extremely helpful co-worker and boss, but most importantly, a very good and a very special friend. And furthermore, I can even think of him as a great matchmaker, too. It was Mirek who was instrumental in suggesting, during his 1983 visit to Czechoslovakia, to my wife Sonia to come to the United States; she eventually did come a year later, in 1984. Through Mirek and his wife Zdenka I met her sometime later and eventually we got married in 1989. And that brings me to another story about Mirek which Sonia keeps reminding me of all the time. The first time she ever heard of me was when Mirek talked to her about UCLA during his 1983 visit to Czechoslovakia; he mentioned to her at that time that he had a graduate student who was working with and for him and who was also from Czechoslovakia; but when he, Mirek, would sometime come to this student's office, the student would often smoke and drink coffee and even read a newspaper with his feet up on his desk. To this day Sonia reminds me of how and what she heard of me for the very first time...

Well, that was then, what about now? Let me answer it this way: Today, Mirku, if you suddenly came into my office, you would find things quite as they were then but with some exceptions: I don't smoke anymore, and instead of coffee I usually drink tea today; and when I want to read a newspaper in my office and/or put my feet up on my desk (to think), I always make sure that the door to my office is closed, so if somebody wants to come in to see me, he or she first has to knock on my door, and before I open it, I always hide the newspaper and/or put my feet down and try to pretend that I have been busy and working all the time. I can say that it was a lesson learned well in the graduate school!

So as I come to the conclusion here, let me, Mirku, thank you very much for everything you have done for me; I only hope that when I was working for you I also was helpful to you in your own work, in addition to also being somebody who you could talk to in Czech so no one around would understand us. And just like at the time when I met you for the very first time so long ago, tonight, let me tell you the same way as I did then:

"Dobrý večer, pane profesore, jsem moc rád, že jsem Vás poznal. Dovolte, abych Vám dnes večer poblahopřál všechno nejlepší k Vašim 75. narozeninám, a popřál Vám hodně zdraví do mnoha dalších let!" ("Good evening Professor; I am very glad to have met you; tonight I would like to wish you very happy 75th birthday, and many more to come!)

Thank you!