Mirek: My Teacher and Friend

PETR HARMANEC

[1] *Astronomical Institute of the Charles University, V Holešovičkách 2, CZ-180 00 Praha 8, Czech Republic*
[2] *Astronomical Institute of the Academy of Sciences, CZ-251 65 Ondřejov, Czech Republic; hec@sunstel.asu.cas.cz*

I first met Mirek on the occasion of an educational knowledge competition, run by the Czechoslovak radio for young people and called *The Radio University*. That time, at the spring of 1959, it was already *The 23rd Radio University: To the Near and Distant Universe*. Mirek approached those of us who passed the initial tests via letters and were invited to a radio studio and told us that if some of us had a serious interest in astronomy, he or she should contact him and ask for advice.

It was the year when the Czechoslovak government approved the proposal made by one minister (who once visited the Ondřejov Observatory) to buy a 2-m Zeiss reflector as a national facility for Czech and Slovak astronomers. Mirek – as one of the key persons responsible for that project – was naturally looking for young people to build a team which would be operating and using the telescope.

I took the chance, wrote a letter to Mirek and, starting in 1959, I used to come to the Ondřejov Observatory every year as a summer student. Later, Mirek became the supervisor of my diploma thesis and – when I joined the Observatory in 1964 – also of my PhD thesis. Actually, for all those years before Mirek left, we shared a joint office at the Observatory.

I need not convince you, present here, that Mirek is an extraordinary man. We all know him as a very gentle, well-behaving and attentive person. Yet, I must add something to this characteristics. I remember that one night during my summer visit to the Observatory in 1959 Mirek and I were removing – for some reason – the guide telescope from the photometric telescope. At a certain moment, each of us was assuming that the other one is holding the guide telescope while we were unscrewing the bolts, and the telescope started to fall down, sliding along my leg. I managed to catch it at the very last moment on my foot and nothing actually happened. However, the words of relief which Mirek said on this occasion, could hardly be reproduced here...

The General Assembly of the IAU to be held in Prague in 1967 was quickly approaching and Mirek called for a meeting of the new, not yet complete team of the stellar department (it was Jiří Grygar, Jiří Horn, Svatopluk Kříž, Zdeněk Pěkný, Josef Havelka and I at that time) and wanted our advice on what kind of presentation of the department could we offer on this occasion. We immediately suggested to build a special mechanical model of a close binary, having a metallic arm moving back and forth with two stellar spectra as the binary revolves around the common centre of the gravity, and we all had a great fun developing the idea to every detail. Mirek, obviously disgusted by us, listened for a while and then abruptly ended the discussion with a memorable sentence which became almost a proverb in the department since then: In Czech, it was "Na blbosti si Vás, stelárníci, vždycky užije!" which in English means something like "When it comes to nutty pranks, I can always rely on you, my dear fellows in the stellar department!" I remembered Mirek and this story again, many years later, when I saw our idea realized on one astronomical exhibition...

In the spring of 1966, as the construction of the 2-m telescope was progressing, the stellar department moved to a new building close to the dome of the telescope. The telescope was officially inaugurated on the occasion of the General Assembly of the IAU in August 1967 and we started regular observations that year. One of the first spectra obtained was a spectrum of Nova Delphini 1967, secured by Jiří Grygar during a commisioning run. About one year later, on the night of August 20/21, 1968, Soviet led armies invaded Czechoslovakia. Jura Grygar and Zdeněk Pěkný observed on that very night and obtained a spectrum of another Nova, this time Nova Vulpeculae 1968. Some of you may still remember that we were sending a reproduction of that spectrogram, with the date of the exposure and with a remark that the picture shows the final, nebulous stage of the Nova evolution, as our New Year postcard. Many colleagues all over the world understood and expressed us their symphaties..

In those years, Mirek and Zdenka had a dog. For what I know, it was the only dog in the Central Europe who had a surname. You could read Vlk Plavec (which in translation means Wolf Swimmer) on his leash. Mirek used to walk the dog near the dome of the 2-m telescope every sunset and in this gentle way, he pushed all of us youngsters to start night observations sharply on time...

In the second half of sixties, the political climate in the socialist Czechoslovakia was becoming a bit more tolerant, the culture was blossoming and travelling abroad became slightly easier. All this then improved still more during the so called Prague spring of 1968. Shortly after the invasion, Mirek went for a visit to Canada and USA, being later accompanied also by his wife Zdenka and their two children Helena and Jirka (still another nickname for Jiří). Mirek and we were exchanging letters frequenly, he was inquiring about the situation and we were trying to provide answers in various ways, to avoid censorship which was re-introduced in the meantime. When we learned one day that Vlk Plavec was sent over the ocean, we realized that we shall have to continue the work without Mirek's leadership...

For the next long 22 years, the only possibility to maintain contacts with Mirek was to disobey the existing rules and exchange the letters with him via personal mail since the deputy director of the Observatory was ordered by politicians to open and read all the official correspondence and any contacts with emigrants were strictly banned. In 1987, when 'perestroika' was being implemented in the Soviet Union and – much less enthusiastically – also in Czechoslovakia, Mirek at last could come back to attend the European Regional Meeting of the IAU in Prague as one of the invited speakers. Still at that time, his visit to the observatory was screened by a security officer who was formally employed as the chief librarian of the Observatory!

It is a great day for me that I can recall here all those past days (including those ugly ones, which, I hope, will never return) with Mirek and so many friends who came on this occasion.

I would like to end my reminiscences by saying that probably the greatest thing Mirek did for us was that he learned us to focus our effort on one large and interesting enough topic and to work as a team. We were good and obedient students in this respect, I believe, and thanks to this, we were able to do a meaningful research even in the less favourable European climate. Our sincere thanks belong to you, Mirek!