Happy to See So Many Friends Here

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Dear Friends,

It is a happy feeling for me and Zdenka to see so may freinds here! I would like to thank most sincerely to all of you for coming – and our special thanks go to Matt Malkan and Ivan Hubeny who secretly organized this friendly gathering. I realize that the proper tone for me would be to tell you a few funny stories from my life, and I am ready to do that – but I have the feeling that it is proper to start seriously. A birthday is an accidental event: instead, I would like to suggest that we should celebrate two great human virtues: Friendship and Courage. They both played a great role in our lives.

I was born in Sedlčany, which is a small town in the central region of Bohemia – a place which seems to be far from everything important. My father had very little formal education, but he was a very gifted man: in the 1920s, he was a self-educated pioneer in building and repairing radios, and in the following decade he mastered color photography in all its steps.

However, he was not a lucky man: When he was 18, the First World War started, and he was immediately drafted, served full four years, was wounded 7 times (fortunately with no lasting effects) – and then he had to serve two more years in the newly formed Czechoslovak army! When he was eventually released, all good jobs were already gone, and he struggled hard until he was eventually appointed head of the employment office of the district. This job very soon became a nightmare: during the economical crisis in the thirties, dozens of desperate unemployed men were coming daily and he could not help them – there were no jobs. And, then, in the fall of 1938 the Nazis dismembered Czechoslovakia, then occupied it in March 1939, and very soon orders came to organize compulsory transports of workers to be half-slaves in Germany.

My father tried to shield the workers as much as he could, but he was eventually arrested by Gestapo, and died in a German concentration camp in 1942. He was arrested on December 11, 1941 – and I do hope that he had been told by someone that on that very day, Hitler made the second biggest blunder of his life and declared war on the USA. Talking about courage – several months after Nazi occupation, the Czech head of the city council, and the German commander of the town garrison, invited the citizens to a meeting, where the commander announced with great happiness that "all the Jews have already been removed from the town" – and he thanked the Czech magistrate for his assistance! Terrible silence fell on the audience, and the Czech, a devoted Catholic, stood there terribly embarrassed. Eventually he said: "The Jews murdered our Lord, Jesus Christ!" The silence was perhaps even deeper, and suddenly the voice of my father was heard, clear and loud. "Which of the local Jewish families did that? The Eliases or the Chobockys?" The German officer inquired promptly about my father – that was possibly the first step towards the arrest – but I was immensely proud of my father!

When I honor courage, I wish to honor my mother first: after my father's arrest, she was immediately abandoned by all our family friends, lost my father's income, and was without any vocational education. Yet she immediately took up a manual job and kept caring greatly for her two boys - we were 16 an 12 in 1941. Another blow fell in 1943, when the Nazis ordered all the inhabitants of our town to abandon their houses, shops, offices, and workshops, and move out – an entire large region in central Bohemia was to become an exercising ground for the German SS units.

This cruel eviction of thousands of people happened to be a blessing for our family. We had nothing to lose. I became deeply interested in astronomy in 1938. And in 1939 February, just before the German occupation, a team of experts visited my lower-level secondary school, and offered – for the first and for the last time! – IQ testing. Then they recommended to my father to do everything to enable me to attend a real high school, so that I might later enroll at the university. Attending the nearest high school (gymnasium) meant to spend daily 2 × 2 hours in trains and on railway stations – but I could follow my dream to become an astronomer! Thus, when we were evicted from my native town, I found a small flat for us at Ondřejov. Commuting to my high school became even more onerous – I had to walk 5 km twice each day, rain, shine, or snow – but in my free time, I could observe and assist at the Ondřejov Observatory! My mother found a job there, too, and she found new friends!

I escaped death at the hands of the Nazis very narrowly twice – and then the war ended, and I enrolled in Physics, Mathematics, and Astronomy at the Charles University in Prague, which was reopened in 1945 (the Nazis closed it in 1939 after students' quiet demonstration against their occupation). The level of astronomy education at the Charles University was ridiculously low, and another disaster hit my nation in 1948, when the Communists seized the power. Pretty soon, new concentration camps were built, and in 1949, I barely squeezed through a political screening (my terrible crime was my membership in the party that had tried to stop the Communists).

I graduated in 1949, entered an equivalent of graduate studies, and got the equivalent of a PhD in 1954. I was then working in the field of meteor astronomy – for almost anything else (except solar physics) there was no opportunity at that time. Zdenka, my wife since 1950, an engineer of electronics by education, played a leading role in the development of a radar for meteor observations.

Since 1957, we lived again at the Ondřejov Observatory, where our two children (Helena, born 1954, and Jirka – George, born 1958) found a happy place to learn and play. I switched to stellar astrophysics thanks to two visits to the University of Manchester, and, especially, to the DAO in Victoria. And, at home, we started observing eclipsing binaries, developed a very good Department of Stellar Astrophysics (with Jiří Grygar, Jiří Horn, Svatopluk Kříž and with Petr Harmanec, who very kindly came to this celebration!), and under the guidance of Luboš Perek, we managed to build a 2-m telescope – and just started gathering our first stellar spectra...

And then another disaster hit: the Soviet army occupied Czechoslovakia in 1968 in an effort to stop the progressing democratization. I was just able to teach for one year at the Charles University when a new round of political screening came, with a very dim prospect for our family – both Zdenka and I were strong supporters of Dubček reforms, and even our children would have paid for it – no higher education for them! During the very early days of Russian occupation, Margherita Hack invited me to a meeting in Trieste, Italy. And there, I could avoid censorship and send a few letters (full of desperation) to several friends, like Bob Koch in Philadelphia, and to Alan Batten at Victoria. Soon a formal invitation came for me to come to Philadelphia to work on a catalog of eclipsing binaries with Robert Koch and Brad Wood, followed by an invitation to come to work at the DAO in Victoria – thanks to a grant from the IAU. And at that time, on May 1, 1969, just a few days before the western frontiers were firmly closed around the country, I was able to take my family with me!

During our stay at Philadelphia in the fall of 1969, the political situation in Czechoslovakia worsened so much that we decided not to return, and applied for asylum. And here again, a chain of friends carried us from Philadelhia to Ohio State (Arne Slettebak) and eventually to UCLA (Dan Popper, George Abell). Everywhere in Canada and in the USA, we met friends who made our stay pleasant and tried to help us.

In conclusion, I must again speak about courage – courage of my wife and two children. They lost their friends, they had to adjust to a new environment and a new language – known a bit to Zdenka, a smaller bit to Helena, and almost unknown to Jirka. When he was sent to a local school before Christmas, he cried – he did not understand whether he was being told to go home or to another room or to go to the playground...

Three months later, he already pulled Zdenka's hand to tell her that she had misunderstood what she was being told in a shop! All three succeeded admirably! Zdenka as a computer programmer, Helenka as a MD, and Jirka is now a vice-president of a company that develops and installs security apparatus.

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OK, so here I am, happy, and immensely grateful to my friends at UCLA and everywhere else, and actually grateful to all the American people for their friendly hospitality and support – and now is the time to tell you a few good stories from our life!

I learned English privately for several years in Czechoslovakia, and even lectured (and was obviously understood) at several international conferences. Nevertheless, my first encounter with an ordinary American was like a cold shower. I was standing on the platform of the Philadelphia railway station one day in 1969, and a train was coming. A lady approached me and asked: "Is this the train to New York?" And I said: "Yes". And she looked me up and down and up again, and said: "Are you French or German?" Until today, I dont know how to twist my mouth to say "yes" the American way!

At the General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union in Dublin, I attended one meeting held in a large lecture room with the rows of seats gradually sloping upwards from the speaker, as usual – except that there were no back doors: the entrance doors were on both sides of the speaker. Quite a few listeners fell asleep during the lecture, but my neighbor – a prominent German astrophysicist – sat at the edge of one of the highest rows, and when he fell asleep, he also fell off his seat into the aisle. The sound was loud, the speaker stopped speaking, every head turned towards the unfortunate guy, who returned meekly to his seat – but after a while, the meeting went on. However, the poor guy felt that he should not stay, and he did not want to offend the speaker by walking out past him. So he started to crawl downward under the seats! The seats were fairly high, so he could crawl, but after a while, his underground activity gradually began to attract attention, and eventually, the speaker stopped to speak, and people were laughing again. By that time the famous astrophysicist made it down to the lowest row of seats, and realizing the unwanted attention, he decided to run out of the room as fast as possible. However, he tripped over someone's foot in the front row, and was then running towards the door bent forward, his head first. My friend remarked: "Look, he will open the door by his head". Yet, virtually in the last few seconds, the door opened, and a brilliant but fortunately also rather fat Australian astrophysicist stood there. He absorbed the impact of the runner's head into his belly, but the momentum of this temporary double system was so large that both of them were pushed back through the door into the hall, and the door closed with a Big Bang.

Talking about door opening – at Ondřejov, I shared office with my good friend Petr Harmanec, who showed a truly excessive politeness one day when he was leaving our office and ready to enter the hallway – and he very politely knocked at the door! I am very, very happy that he is among my guests today. It was he who worked with me on the Roche model tables, but his last name at that time was Kratochvíl. The only thing that worries me today is that he plans to travel from here to the Mexican observatory on San Pedro Martir. Since his first name is Petr, I will be happier when I hear from him that he is happily back in Prague, and has not become a martyr...

Associations, associations! It is fantastic how our brain works! When we were calculating those Roche model tables, we could for the first time use a real computer – albeit a primitive type, into which the programs were to be fed by means of a paper tape. Our computing time was shared by a colleague who studied the upper atmosphere of the Earth, and insisted that he had priority, since his program had already been tested. So he fed a long tape with thousands of tiny holes into the computer, lights started to blink like mad, sounds were many and loud, and eventually a very wide output paper began to crawl out, and it contained a huge matrix of resulting numbers – and they all read 0 0 0 0, in many columns and many rows. He said: "Just a small error, I will fix it right away" – and punched a few more holes, fed the program in – and the computer was blinking and humming even more wildly, and then the improved output started to come out again – and lo and behold, all columns and all rows read uniformly: 1 1 1 1 1 1. Then we chased him away, but our time was over anyway...

Speaking about dear friends, I must pay my tribute to Alan Batten here. When I stayed in Victoria, on one of my outings, I damaged my ankle (at a place properly called Foul Bay), and dear Alan transported me very kindly around Victoria. On top of that leg trouble, my tooth began to hurt, so Alan took me to a dentist. The dentist's office was in a half-completed new building, and as we were approaching, we heard a loud sound of a heavy drill – and Alan said encouragingly: "See, the doctor is already at work!" Poor Alan, he also offered to take me to the DAO Observatory for my observing night. As we were approaching a small shopping center, I expressed my wish to buy some food in order to stay alive during the long night. With my limited English, I said I would like to buy "extra food". To my surprise and shock, Alan stopped in front of a shop displaying not food but various artificial replacements of legs, arms, etc. And I learned then and there that I must pronounce "fooooddd" but "foott". (In Czech, these endings with "-d" and "-t" are pronounced the same way, as "t").

Now let us talk about my students. I have been regularly teaching large classes on elementary astronomy. It so happened that one day – just the day before final exam, I was in our departmental office, and so was my teaching assistant. A student walked in and addressed me: "Please can you tell me where I can find the TA, Dick Crawford?" I said: "You are lucky – he is just standing over there", and I pointed deeper into the large room. And the student approached Dick and said: "Look – you are a student, too, so you will understand! Could you please describe to me my professor in Astronomy 3, Plavec – I am to take his final exam tomorrow and I would not like to be embarrassed when I run into him tomorrow". And Dick said: "Well, don't worry about tomorrow, it already happened today – Professor Plavec looks exactly, but really exactly, as the man you addressed before me". Poor guy, he ran away in panic – and I recognized him in class – but he got a C on the final exam and in the class...

My son, Jirka or George, also deserves to be appreciated here. He learned to read very early, by a process of self-education, and very soon, he also became interested in science, especially biology – so, naturally, he saw references to Darwin's "On the Origins of Species." One day, when he was about 7, we took him to Vyšehrad in Prague, a high rock above the river where there are remnants of an ancient castle of Czech kings. On a side of this huge rock, there is a large hospital with a large maternity ward. And we told Jirka: “Look, this is where you were born.” He was obviously shocked, and after a while he asked: “Is it here where they raise and keep monkeys?”

Shortly after the death of J.V. Stalin, the communist grip on Czechoslovak people was relaxed a bit, and we could travel as a group as far as – imagine! – Poland! Czech and Polish astronomers agreed to hold a joint meeting in Wroclaw. Both sides assured each other that we could understand each other’s language without difficulty, which was pretty far from true. At the ceremonial final dinner, after we had already had some drinks while standing, we sat down at the tables, and our leader, Dr. Link, was ready to offer our thanks to our Polish guests, but he wanted to be sure that the President of the Wroclaw University was present.

So he asked in Czech: “Je pan rektor přítomný?”, which in Czech, is a perfectly normal question. In Czechoslovakia, the title of the University President was “rektor”, and “přítomný” simply means “present”. We were shocked to see our Polish colleagues crawling under the tables or using other means of suppressing laughter. And then we learned that “přítomný” in Polish means “someone who drunk a lot but has recovered sufficiently and is again capable of understanding what the speaker says.”

At the IAU General Assembly in Sydney, Australia, there were, on the university campus, separate dormitories for gentlemen and ladies who could not afford living in hotels. At that time, the Assistant General Secretary of the IAU was a Czech who spoke English quite well but was not too familiar with the somewhat delicate phrases of the social life. Thus, when he saw an astronomer walking by with the fly of his trousers wide open, he approached him very politely and said: “Your toilet is out of order.” To his shock, the astronomer replied: “I know, this is why I am running to the ladies’ dorms!”

When I enrolled at the Charles University in Prague in 1945, I was a nut! I enrolled in three majors: Physics, Mathematics, and Astronomy. Each of them required additional courses in related disciplines (such as Geology and Meteorology), and when I added all the mandatory courses, they added up to 80 hours of lectures per week! So I had to drop some, but in the meantime, the President of the University created one more mandatory course for all students, namely swimming lessons. Actually, we were given two options: either to take regular swimming lessons, or those who knew how to swim could take just the final exam.

I was not only a nut, but also a country simpleton. Until then, I had been living in a country where swimming pools did not exist, and where swimming was possible only in rather distant ponds, in which the water was bearably warm for only about two months per year. And I was no good in sports. Thus I sincerely believed that since I could swim for some 30 meters in just one style, I was a good swimmer.

When the day of the swimming test came, it was a real disaster for me, since I could pass two disciplines out of six, and even these with a dose of cheating. When I came to the secretary of the PE Department, she told me that I had not passed the test, and she must put a big stamp saying “non-swimmer” into my official study book (which contained all the courses taken and the grades received, so our privacy was very limited). Yet she was obviously nice, and with a bit of begging, I could have avoided the embarrassing stamp. However, to her surprise, instead of begging, I asked where she would put the stamp. And when she said: “This will be very embarrassing to you, since I must put it on the front page of your study book, right under your name.” To her even bigger surprise, I said quite enthusiastically: “OK, please, do it!” She shook her head, opened my study book on the front page, and then said: “I will not do it for you, one day you may make money with this!”

Here is the explanation: “Swimmer” means ”Plavec” in Czech. So she was expected to put, under the big letters of my name, PLAVEC, a big stamp saying “NEPLAVEC” = “non-swimmer”. Thus she made me pass the test, and I am Plavec, plavec.

Now is the time to say something about my effects on the weather. For my observing project on eclipsing binaries, I selected S Equulei, since it had been poorly observed, but was favorably placed for our observations at the Ondřejov Observatory, being a fall star. Actually, I started the spectroscopic observations first, at the DAO in Victoria, and attempted to observe the primary eclipse, hoping that it would be total. With the narrow dome slit open, I knew little about the weather. About half-way through the exposure, I noticed that the stars had disappeared from the slit, so as a precaution, I covered the big telescope mirror. Quite suddenly, a real downpour came, and before I managed to close the dome slit, the floor was covered by water but, fortunately, the telescope was unharmed.

This incident should have warned me to stay away from S Equulei! Instead, back at Ondřejov, I started photoelectric observations. On the night of the primary eclipse, a terrible thunderstorm came (an event extremely rare in late September!), and the lighting hit the power line to the dome, and the power line completely melted into scattered droplets of metal in the grass.

After this experience, I gave up observations at home. It so happened that I could travel with my friend, Luboš Perek, to Egypt, so I tried to observe the primary eclipse from the Egyptian observatory El-Kottameia, which lies in the Sahara desert about half-way between Cairo and the Red Sea. On the night of the eclipse, a terrible thunderstorm came from the north. The local people, quite unused to thunderstorms, recalled the WW II battles between Montgomery and Rommel up there in the north, and were quite scared. Then a terrible, very heavy and long-lasting rain came and the desert around the famous pyramids south of Cairo was completely flooded! I have slides to prove it - the Cheops pyramid is so perfectly reflected in the surrounding lake that you cannot recognize which side of the slide should be up! After this experience with inundating the desert, I got the opportunity to teach and observe in Catania, on the Italian island Sicily. The astronomy department there has a nice observatory above the city. Now you are expecting me to say: "And when the night of the eclipse came, there was a terrible thunderstorm". No, not at all! When the night of the primary eclipse came, the sky was beautifully clear, and I was tempted to sing the famous air from Puccini's opera "Tosca": "E lucevan le stelle, e olezzava la terra". In the end, singing was all we could do! I forgot to tell you that the observatory is located on a flat just below the actual peak and crater of the Etna volcano, and on that night, Etna erupted violently, and the sky was full of high-flying hot pieces of lava – the most impressive fireworks I have ever seen! – but we could not open the observing dome.

And then we moved to Los Angeles and I started to observe eclipsing binaries at the Lick Observatory. However, I decided not to observe S Equulei from there, since the San Andreas fault passes close to the Observatory, and I did not want to cause a major earthquake in California! My Italian colleagues at the Asiago Observatory eventually succeeded in observing the primary eclipse and found it to be only partial...

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It is quite interesting to realize how our life is sometimes affected by pure chance. Skipping classes at school – what is called "truancy" here – is certainly not the right behavior of a student, especially a prominent student. When a student avoids classes in Physical Education, he is ridiculous on top of that. I had an acceptable justification for skipping the PE on Thursdays. It was the last period, and if I managed to catch the earlier train, I came home (and had lunch) three hours earlier. And the teacher of PE was also teaching us Chemistry, and I regularly helped him in the laboratory.

Why am I talking about that now? In this way, I managed to come home around 1 p.m. on December 11, 1941. My father just finished his lunch, and was leaving for his office. The office was in another part of the same building.

In a few minutes, the door opened, my father was back, and behind him were two Gestapo agents. Before they led my father away, they stole our radio and a few more things – obviously for their personal enrichment. Then my father embraced my mother and me and he was gone. The fact that I could embrace him at that moment has meant a lot to me all my life. I only regret that I did not thank him for everything he did for me. And I was able to comfort my mother, who was close to collapse. My younger brother came too late...

I know, my story is so ordinary! Millions and millions of families suffered a much worse fate. When I drive past the National Cemetery here near UCLA, and see thousands and thousands of tiny white tombstones and crosses, I always think of the millions of healthy young men who sacrificed their lives to stop the evil. And yet, at the beginning, Adolf Hitler could have been stopped easily. He presented all his plans in his book "Mein Kampf" but – unfortunately – the leading politicians did not take him seriously. And not many people were probably ready to offer a little sacrifice (or discomfort) in order to forestall the forthcoming huge sacrifices.

Are we smarter now? Are our leading politicians wiser? Will the forthcoming generations be more human?

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Perhaps I should conclude on a gentler note. Please, do visit Prague, it's a beautiful city to behold, especially from the ramparts of the ancient castle at Vyšehrad! Then attend one of the famous outdoor concerts in a Prague park, and appreciate the beautiful music of Smetana's "Má vlast" ("My country"), remembering that the first of the six beautiful symphonic poems, "Vyšehrad", is dedicated to the history of that national monument, and, please, come back to the walls of Vyšehrad for the second time, and check for my son if they still raise monkeys down below!