

VARIABLE STAR ASTRONOMY IN HUNGARY: A PROGRESS REPORT

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**Abstract**

A report is given on the author's recent trip to Hungary, which included attending a meeting of the Hungarian Variable Star Observers and visiting a number of observatories and amateur and professional astronomers.

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The following is the text of a talk given at the 78th Spring Meeting of the AAVSO:

I wish to extend to you the greetings and best wishes of the AAVSO members and observers in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

I have just come from Budapest, where I attended the spring meeting of the Hungarian Variable Star Observers at which I had the privilege of representing the AAVSO. As on my earlier visit to Hungary, our member Attila Mizser and his wife Maria were my gracious hosts.

I would like to share with you the highlights of the meeting and give you a progress report on how our Eastern Bloc members are doing. Luckily, Mr. Silhan, a representative of the Brno Observatory in Czechoslovakia, also attended the meeting, so I am able to report on variable star astronomy in both countries.

The meeting began with Attila giving a summary of Hungarian observations for 1988. One hundred two observers contributed 35,910 observations. Light curves of these observations were published using a laser printer available to one of the members, and I was given a set of these curves to bring back for the AAVSO library.

Other contributions to the meeting included a travelogue by one member who visited the United States last year and spent some time at John Bortle's Brooks Observatory. A professional astronomer spoke on an interesting magnetic star.

Mr. Silhan reported on variable star activity in Czechoslovakia. There, eclipsing binaries are the sole type of variables observed. This practice began last century, but has been regularly pursued since 1960. The observing is conducted at Brno and other public observatories, with each observatory having its own program, which are supported by the Ministry of Culture. The Czechs publish charts, and Mr. Silhan kindly provided me with a newly released set to bring to the AAVSO. Mr. Silhan was very interested in our role in the HIPPARCOS mission, and eagerly filled out a HIPPARCOS chart order I had brought. He said he would try to interest the other observers in Czechoslovakia to observe the variable stars on the HIPPARCOS list and send their observations to the AAVSO.

I read a letter written by Dr. Janet Mattei, Director of the AAVSO, thanking the Hungarian observers for their valuable contributions and inviting them both to participate in our HIPPARCOS observing project and to attend the AAVSO European meeting in Brussels next summer. I also read a paper on V503 Cygni written by Charles

Scovil and me, and explained in detail our involvement with HIPPARCOS. The attendees had many questions about HIPPARCOS, and were also interested in the status of the Hubble Space Telescope. They were interested as well to learn how the Carolyn Hurless Memorial Sponsorship Fund works.

After the meeting ended I spent the rest of my time in Hungary visiting observers, observatories, and historical sites.

I must tell you how impressive is the work accomplished by the Hungarians. Bela Berente and Sandor Papp make most of the telescopes used by the observers. There is little telephone service except within the observers' workplaces, so communication is difficult and slow, accomplished mostly by letter - it takes two weeks for news of astronomical events to reach Hungary. Arranging meetings is understandably difficult, and most of the work is done by individual observers in their homes and at observing camps held periodically during the year. Financial support is almost nil, particularly due to a reduction in spending on science by the government. Neither has there been a great deal of support from professional astronomers in the past. However, the Hungarian Astronomical Association (HAA), originally founded in 1946 by Dr. Gyorgy Kulin, has just been reorganized. The reorganization is a joint effort between amateur and professional astronomers, many of whom are on the staff of *Meteor*, the journal of the Hungarian variable star observers. The headquarters of the HAA is in Budapest, where *Meteor* is published. The HAA hopes to provide a major medium for astronomy in Hungary in the future.

One very sad event that occurred while I was in Hungary was the death of Dr. Kulin, whose many contributions to astronomy through the years had earned him the title of the Father of Hungarian Amateur Astronomy. He was 85 years old, and had been well respected and loved throughout Hungary. I was invited to attend his funeral, but my travel itinerary made it impossible.

Dr. Kulin was born in Transylvania in 1905 and was trained as a teacher. Not finding work (and in spite of not having intended an astronomical career) he became a staff member at the Konkoly Observatory, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in the 1930's, where his interests turned to asteroid orbital calculations and observations. He discovered 80 asteroids and 2 comets with the 24-inch telescope at Konkoly. One of the comets, Whipple-Bernasconi-Kulin (1942a) was discovered visually with the 10-cm finder on the 24-inch.

Dr. Kulin began to realize that Hungarians had little knowledge of astronomy, so he devoted the rest of his life to the popularization of astronomy and the growth of amateur astronomy. His goal was to take the excitement felt by Galileo upon looking through the telescope and spread this excitement among amateurs and the public. To this end, he learned mirror making and helped others to make telescopes. He made some 6,000 mirrors during his lifetime. Dr. Kulin is also credited with helping to establish the network of public observatories in Hungary. His book, **World of the Telescope**, is now in its fourth edition.

I would like to thank Attila and Maria Mizser for their kind hospitality, and all the observers for the warm reception they all gave me. I would also like to thank Dr. Janet Mattei for the letter of introduction she wrote for me to Dr. Bela Szeidl, Director of the Konkoly Observatory.