

## In Memory of Cuno Hoffmeister, 1892—1968

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Most of us here in the audience came into astronomy the usual way. We went through school and university. Some of us wanted to become astronomers right from the beginning, others became interested in astronomy after having studied physics or mathematics. It is therefore difficult for us to imagine the situation of a young boy, who wants to become an astronomer, but who has to leave school at the age of 14, when his father lost most of his fortune and could no longer afford to send his son to school. „It was the darkest period in my life, everything seemed to be grey and hopeless“, wrote HOFFMEISTER later about that time, when he had to work in his father's factory in order to learn business. He continued in this work but he was interested in astronomy only. All his spare time was devoted to amateur observation and to teaching himself mathematics. When the First World War began, his father's business failed, and he decided to try to find an astronomical position despite the fact that he lacked all the requisits.

In the files of Bamberg observatory there is a letter he wrote to HARTWIG, the director, in 1915, when he was 23. The letter is a cry for help. Here are a few quotations: „I had to yield to my father's pressure and had to leave school. — Since then I always have had the feeling that I am in the wrong place. — My parents hoped that two years of work in America would have a good influence on me, but the contrary was the case. — The more I learned about astronomy, the bigger the gap became between profession and inclination, and the more I learned to hate my job. — Could you use me as an assistant? — I could start as soon as you want. — I am also willing to work for a week's trial period.“

He indeed got a job here at the Bamberg observatory where ZINNER, the regular assistant, was drafted and HOFFMEISTER could replace him for the duration of the war. The years in Bamberg had a great influence on him. The research topics he began here, meteors and variable stars, were to determine the direction of his studies for the rest of his life.

He knew that he could work here only for a short time, and in these days he first thought that he some day would have his own observatory. This seemed to him the only way to become an astronomer since the usual paths appeared to be closed to him, because of his inadequate education. He did not know at that time that twelve years later he would finally receive a ph. d. in astronomy. During these twelve years he had to make up for his missing education, he attended schools when he could, but sometimes he had to interrupt his schooling to earn money. When he finally received his ph. d. at the age of 35, the way to a regular professional career was open to him, but by this time the idea of having his own observatory was so firmly fixed in his mind that he never could give it up.

He had already begun to build an observatory on a hill near his home town Sonneberg. He returned there and worked for the rest of his life. It is not my purpose here to describe his scientific achievements, in fact most of you are as familiar with them as I am.

Rather, I want to spend a few minutes sharing with you some personal reminiscences of CUNO HOFFMEISTER.

During and right after the Second World War, I had the good fortune to spend my school vacations working at his observatory. The contact with him, who never forgot his own difficult early years and always had time to help young astronomers, had a great influence on my life.

He easily could become very excited about any scientific subject. Not only important questions like the distribution of variable stars in the galaxy could occupy his mind. I remember his watching a simple partial lunar eclipse from the roof of his observatory and getting excited about the different atmospheric effects which influenced his observation through binoculars. Therefore the following anecdote, if not true, is at least well invented: One day

HOFFMEISTER received a phone call from his brother, that their parents house down in Sonneberg was on fire. The first thing he did was to take his binocular and to try to see whether the event could be observed from the roof of the observatory.

Clear moonless sky at Sonneberg observatory always meant that all cameras had to be in action, and if you look up the old plate records for Christmas Eve you will find that — after the assistants had left — HOFFMEISTER and his wife kept the patrol cameras going.

Observing natural phenomena was his passion. He could forget everything else when there was some new event to be seen. This is illustrated by a story he relates in his book „Sterne über der Steppe“ (p. 50), the report of his astronomical expeditions in Africa.

One day he came across large groups of sea lions on the coast. He wrote, „we stand and watch, take pictures and make movies. A wave catches my wife. But what does this matter? This great spectacle does not allow us to deal with minor misfortunes“.

Like everyone of my age in Germany I got an education in school which was strongly influenced by national socialism. When I came to Sonneberg at the age of 17 the discussion with HOFFMEISTER and his associates first opened my mind to independent political thought. I especially remember our discussion when I arrived in Sonneberg on July 20, 1944, the day of the unsuccessful attempt to kill Hitler.

A year later the war was over, and I again landed in Sonneberg. One day HOFFMEISTER came and told us, that he just heard the news in the radio, and that „it seems as if the Americans have been able to reproduce the process which normally provides the energy in stars“. It was the day of Hiroshima. It was typical for him that he first related the news to astronomy.

I also happened to be with him on what was probably the saddest day in his life. In the summer of 1945 the tides of oppression and injustice unleashed by the german occupiers throughout Europe rolled back over Sonneberg observatory which had been undamaged during the war. Without warning within a few hours most of the instruments were dismantled and removed as war reparations. HOFFMEISTER never got over the loss of his astrograph, even though the Academy of Science of the German Democratic Republic later recompensated him several times.

The eagerness of a boy who was not allowed to become an astronomer determined the course of HOFFMEISTER's life. He was a true lover of astronomy. He was interested in money only to the extent that it could advance his scientific work. He wrote in his youth: „In the end it is not the amount of money but the driving spirit which decides whether there is success or not“. Today we are more sceptical and feel tempted to smile at the enthusiastic remarks of a young man. But in his life CUNO HOFFMEISTER gave us proof that this statement was true for him.