

World Line Crossings with Waltraut Seitter and Hilmar Duerbeck

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My interactions over four decades with Waltraut Seitter (1930–2007) and mainly Hilmar Duerbeck (1948–2012) are summarized in this paper, from student times in Liège to IUE observations in Spain and history projects encompassing articles in edited books as well as biographical notices for both regional and encyclopedic endeavors. But, as illustrated by the article, the human exchange has been much broader.

Dieser Beitrag fasst meine Beziehungen zu Waltraut Seitter (1930–2007) und hauptsächlich Hilmar Duerbeck (1948–2012) im Laufe von vier Jahrzehnten zusammen, von Studententagen in Liège bis zu IUE-Beobachtungen in Spanien und Geschichtsprojekten, die Aufsätze in herausgegebenen Büchern sowie biographische Notizen für regionale und enzyklopädische Unternehmen umfassten. Wie der Beitrag zeigt, war der menschliche Austausch jedoch weit umfassender.

Overview

My first encounter with Waltraut Seitter dates back to the time when I was still a student at Liège University in Belgium. In late April 1968, Léo Houziaux organized a visit across the border to Hoher List Observatory for a few of his students and collaborators. Waltraut was our host. For us students, this was a first and not-to-be-missed opportunity to witness live observing at an active observatory. We visited the various facilities and were briefed by the astronomers on duty that evening: Waltraut definitely, but also, as far as I can remember, Wilhelm Seggewiss and Edward Geyer among others. Hilmar Duerbeck was not yet around since he was still studying physics in Saarbrücken.

It took a dozen years for another interaction. I was then in charge of the scientific operations on the International Ultraviolet Explorer (IUE) at the Villanueva Satellite Tracking Station (Vilspa) of the European Space Agency (ESA) near Madrid in Spain. The IUE satellite was a joint venture between ESA, the US

National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA) and the UK Scientific and Engineering Research Council (SERC). We were operating the spacecraft in Europe for one third of the time, alternating by the day between programs approved by ESA and by SERC. Since IUE was conceived as a guest observer facility, just like classical ground-based observatories, scientists whose observing proposals had been selected were supposed to come physically to Vilspa (see *e.g.* Willis 2013). The IUE archives¹ reveal that altogether Waltraut and Hilmar (who were married in 1975) got three programs accepted: WS322² (1980) with Waltraut as Principal Investigator (PI), LM111³ (1989) and SI077⁴ (1996), both with Hilmar as PI. Since I was based at Vilspa from 1977 to 1983, I dealt only with the observations for WS322. They took place on 11 May 1980. From my pocket diary of that year, it appears that I was also in charge of the corresponding “training” – a mandatory preliminary phase aimed at introducing observers to the satellite operations and procedures, as well as at running a number of checks on their target preparation, finding charts, and intended exposure times.

According to the IUE archives, spectra collected during the shift allocated to WS322 were subsequently used in several papers (Szkody *et al.* 1991, Wood & Lockley 2000, Gilmozzi & Selvelli 2007, and Selvelli *et al.* 2008), but there has been apparently no paper referring to those data with Waltraut and/or Hilmar as author or co-author. No paper is mentioned in the IUE database for SI077, but one article is listed for LM111 (Evans *et al.* 1992), including Hilmar and Waltraut as co-authors.

In September 1998, Strasbourg Observatory (that I had joined in 1983) organized a meeting on the first results from the data collected by the Hipparcos satellite – a spacecraft closely associated with the house. Back in the late 1960s indeed, Pierre Lacroute, one of my predecessors as Director of Strasbourg Observatory, started developing a project for an astrometric satellite that ultimately became Hipparcos (see *e.g.* pp. 44–45 in Heck 2005). The spacecraft was launched in 1989 (see *e.g.* Kovalevsky 2005). The Hipparcos Catalogues made available in June 1997 were seen as a milestone in understanding cosmic distances by providing astrometric and photometric data of unprecedented precision. Waltraut and Hilmar contributed to the 1998 Haguenu colloquium with a paper on Carl Wirtz (1874–1939), a Strassburg-based pioneer⁵ in cosmic scaling (Seitter & Duerbeck 1999).

¹ Reachable for instance via <http://archive.stsci.edu/>.

² “Dwarf Novae”.

³ “The Highly Structured Shell of Nova RR Pic (1925) in the UV”.

⁴ “A Multi-Wavelength Study of the Quiescent and Flaring Activity of the Algol System RZ Cas”.

⁵ Carl Wirtz (1876–1939), the “European Hubble without telescope” (see *e.g.* Sandage 1995), joined Strasbourg Observatory (then German) in 1902 as “Observer”, became Professor in 1909, and was called to the army in 1916. He was expelled by the French authorities in 1919 after the city returned to France at the outcome of World War I.

That historical paper was the reason for me to get in touch with them a few years later, leading subsequently to continual interactions with Hilmar on a variety of projects.

Historical Publications and Biographies

Having had myself an international trajectory and having served for a few years as Director of Strasbourg Observatory, I became naturally interested in the multinational history of the place.⁶

I started writing historical notes, often correcting erroneous statements by local amateur astronomers and/or historians, and even by one of my French successors as Director who, in a widely distributed glossy leaflet, wrongly identified the German Emperor who founded the observatory. After a while, I decided to produce an edited book gathering together various chapters on the matter: the volume on the *Multinational History of Strasbourg Astronomical Observatory* (MNHSAO, Heck 2005).

While agreeing initially to provide a paper on Wirtz, Hilmar ultimately contributed to that volume with three chapters as single author (Duerbeck 2005a,b,c) and two chapters in collaboration with others (Duerbeck & Seitter 2005, Traut *et al.* 2005). During the corresponding preliminary phase, Hilmar and Waltraut (not so well already, see hereafter) came down to Strasbourg Observatory and gave a talk, a double one in fact, as described by the announcement reproduced in appendix and that had been circulated on the general e-mailing list for such events.

In line with the strong regional identity, Alsatian associations of historians, grouped in the *Fédération des Sociétés d'Histoire et d'Archéologie d'Alsace (FSHAA*⁷), have been issuing until late in the 2000s a multivolume collection entitled *Nouveau Dictionnaire de la Biographie Alsacienne (NDBA*⁸) gathering together biographical notices on people who played some role locally or had some importance in the area. After the publication of the MNHSAO volume, I had been approached to provide notices on the major scientists, French and German ones, from Strasbourg Observatory (including myself!) not yet appearing in the already published volumes. I suggested to share the work with Hilmar: he would deal with the astronomers from the German periods (plus myself), and I would take care of the astronomers from the French times. As Hilmar wrote in English, I translated his contributions into French and we cross-checked each other's writings.

⁶ German from foundation till 1919, French from 1919 to 1940, German during World War II (WWII), and French again after WWII.

⁷ Federation of Alsatian Societies for History and Archeology.

⁸ New Dictionary of the Alsatian Biography.

Alas, the muddled (to say the least) organization or state of mind of the NDBA chief editor resulted in two of Hilmar's notices being published under my name instead of his. There was no way we could get this fixed in spite of corrective attempts at the level of the proofs (see hereafter). Therefore I want to repeat clearly here that the NDBA entries on Hellerich and Rosenberg were originally written by Hilmar. They are properly listed as such in the bibliography of the present paper (Duerbeck 2006b,c,d,e and 2007a,b,c).

While putting together the MNHSAO volume, it became obvious that WWII times were not thoroughly covered astronomically speaking, not only for Strasbourg Observatory (then again in a territory annexed by Germany), but for German astronomy as a whole. It took me some strong argumentation to convince Hilmar to write a paper on that period. But once he started falling for the project, his enthusiasm became stronger and stronger as he collected bits and pieces, shaping a remarkable contribution that appeared in the seventh volume of the series *Organizations and Strategies in Astronomy*⁹ [OSA 7] under the title "German Astronomy in the Third Reich" (Duerbeck 2006a).

Hilmar's contributions to the books I produced were unanimously praised, often directly to me as the editor of the volumes, but also in reviews published here and there such as the following one on the MNHSAO volume published in the *Observatory*, encompassing also the other chapters on the German periods at Strasbourg Observatory: "The achievements of the German astronomers of Strasbourg, generally unknown in France, were indeed quite notable. This is perhaps one of the most attractive features of this book." (Pecker 2007)

But of all verbal comments I received, those on "German Astronomy in the Third Reich" (Duerbeck 2006a) published in the OSA 7 volume were definitely the most numerous ones, as if Hilmar had succeeded to infuse into the readers his own enthusiasm in working on this till-then little researched theme, mostly ignored by outsiders. Here is the beginning of a long message by Adriaan Blaauw addressed directly to Hilmar: "I have read your article with great interest. It is a most welcome description of matters that, even for astronomers of my generation, who consciously lived through the war years, remained a bit obscure." [01 Jul 2006]

Hilmar also contributed to Wikipedia under the pen name or alias *Eifelgeist*. Among other things, he wrote a biographical page for Waltraut for the German and English versions of Wikipedia, but he needed some help for the French one. This is how, in 2008 and under the alias *Vennggeist*¹⁰, I became his shadow translator into French, not only for Waltraut's page, but also for other pages such as Wirtz's and Wislicenus'. Other biographical contributions to Wikipedia –

⁹ On that series, see <http://www.aheck.org/osabooks.htm>

¹⁰ Vennggeist is also the name of my publishing venture (see e.g. <http://www.vennggeist.org/>).

especially those on German Strassburg astronomers – were envisaged, but we never managed to materialize them before Hilmar’s untimely death.

In his typical way, Hilmar would often shoot e-messages to me when he had managed to unearth new documentation or photographs, or when he had succeeded in establishing contact with descendants of such or such scientist, for instance with the great-granddaughter of Walter Wislicenus¹¹, living in California. Hilmar could spend hours talking to them on the phone.

Some of his phone bills must have been huge.

Here is an interesting example from one of his messages to me:

“During my Nazi astronomy research, I came across an Einstein letter of 1933 where he recommends a ‘worthy astronomer, a Bohemian Jew, aged 33, with wife & child’ to someone in Switzerland, but he did not mention his name. Looking through the portrait gallery of the AG of 1931, I immediately found ‘Arthur Beer, Reichenberg, Bohemia, 1900’ (you have been on the board of his Vistas). So I phoned the ‘child’ Peter Beer, I could verify my identification, and we might prepare a little note.”

[12 Aug 2005]¹²

Glimpses

A full booklet would be necessary to summarize the multiple interactions with Hilmar, almost exclusively by e-mail, and to illustrate his vast knowledge, his kindness, his sound advices, his sharp comments with touches of humor, and sometimes his well-targeted criticisms on some dear colleagues and other aspects of the “astronomical life”.

All this covered a broad variety of matters, from historical themes to cultural activities as illustrated by the following excerpts:

“I had already planned a trip to Leipzig, first to indulge in my hobby, by visiting a 5-hour performance of Berlioz’ *Les Troyens* (cond: Marc Albrecht, staging: Guy Joosten), and second, to talk to Gisela Muenzel, a specialist on the history of Leipzig Obs., where *e.g.* Bauschinger and Schiller moved after leaving Strasbourg.” [08 Dec 2003]

¹¹ Walter Wislicenus (1859–1905) joined Strasbourg Observatory in 1880. In 1899, he founded the “Astronomischer Jahresbericht”, a structured annual bibliography of astronomy-related publications that survived him and became “Astronomy and Astrophysics Abstracts” in 1969. The last volume was published in 2001 (literature of Year 2000).

¹² Cf. Duerbeck & Beer (2006f).

“I also often thought of our meeting in Bitburg.¹³ Afterwards we had a wonderful walk across the sandstone formations of the ‘la Suisse luxembourgeoise’. But then life became hectic, I spent a few days in Brussels, and then a week in Leipzig, where we attended a scandalous premiere of Wagner’s Flying Dutchman (I found it quite entertaining).”
[18 Oct 2008]

Following Hilmar’s various recommendation on Leipzig, I cannot visit the city without spending a meal at “Auerbachs Keller” that has become an at least yearly mandatory pilgrimage (see also Nath 2012).

We would often exchange historical documentation, including egyptology:

“See if they mention the research of Duemichen (the egyptologist at KWU¹⁴). From time to time I think that one should work on this: my request was to ask for personal papers (diaries, etc.) in the Duemichen estate that is kept at Strasbourg egyptology (or whatever) department or library, more specifically if there is anything about his Egyptian expedition of 1868.”
[03 Oct 2006]

Linguistics was also part of our talks as Hilmar was mastering several languages, including some Spanish. He also used to make allusion or to gently pick me about the “fourth Belgian language” as he knew my mother tongue was Walloon that never made it as an official language in the country (next to Dutch, French and German),¹⁵ the irony behind all this being that he was officially affiliated to a Flemish (Dutch-speaking) university via our common friend Chris Sterken. And everybody heard of the frictions between linguistic communities in Belgium ...

Good humor and self-derision were common such as:

“It seems that we are both ‘early workers’, I am sitting comfortably in my pyjama with a cup of coffee at home, glad that I don’t have to drive to work since there is snow outside.” [29 Dec 2004]

And commenting compliments received from others on the NDBA notice he wrote on me:

“Thanks for the flowers that have grown on your bed. Silly English language, the bed in the garden! They don’t know the difference between Beet and Bett ... but this makes one of these English jokes possible: If we

¹³ On my way Northwards to the meeting “400 Years of the Telescope” at ESTEC in Noordwijk, we had lunch in Bitburg on 28 Sep 2008. This is when I met Gisela for the first time, but also Hilmar in person for the last time.

¹⁴ Kaiser-Wilhelms-Universität (Straßburg).

¹⁵ See for instance Nath (2014a).

would not have been in the same bed, we would not be in the same jam (that not only refers to strawberries).” [11 Dec 2005]

On another register:

“In past weeks I had to proofread three new books [...], as well as the articles for the forthcoming issue of [a journal]. Too bad I haven’t chosen the easier life of a Roman galley slave. And, please, don’t ask me about the status of the Strasbourg article ...” [27 Jun 2007]

Mess with NDBA

As we were respectively involved in editorial activities, Hilmar and I used to share comments on fellow editors and publishing practices. It so happened that we had jointly our worst experience as authors with the biographical notices for the NDBA, going through all kinds of state of mind when contributing to this Alsatian biography: wondering what was going on, being seriously embarrassed when realizing the mistakes on authorship, being highly frustrated when the requests for rectification were ignored, etc.

An idea of all that mess can be obtained from the following (far from exhaustive) sequence of excerpts from our exchanges illustrating the editor’s incompetency to deal with biographies of scientists and ignorance of copyright regulations:¹⁶

[me to Hilmar] “Btw, I did not want to detail this in earlier messages, but [the editor] had come up with weird requests regarding the bios, together with a total rewriting of Lallemand’s bio based on things that I have simply been unable to find in Lallemand’s own papers at the Academy archives. I went to Paris especially to check out what I am now obliged to call fantasies. [The editor] called me one evening and seemed to be out of his mind, overworked (his own word), confusing things (was this perhaps the case on Lallemand’s issue?), confessing to be unaware of how research/higher education is working in other countries, and even that he could have never imagined that a physicist could be an astronomer (sic). I was feeling really bad after this and am still worried about what will ultimately come out. At some stage, I even considered pulling out/withdrawing the bios. Those guys get official money [...] and have a real impact in the whole area through what local media and the outside world consider as a reference work. So they better get things right ...” [02 Mar 2006]

¹⁶ The name is deliberately omitted here. Decades later, students of that person recalled someone “special”.

[me to Hilmar] “I have a letter to them leaving now, thanking them for the complimentary copies, returning the proof for Rougier’s bio [...], but mainly calling their attention on the need to put credits for the illustrations. Frankly, I don’t mind if they do their stuff amateurishly, but I do not want trouble, for instance with the Academy of Sciences, because they ignore reproduction and copyright regulations.” [10 Jun 2006]

[Hilmar, parodying Asterix stories] “You know, toute la Gaule observe le copyright. Toute? Non! Une ville peuplée d’irréductibles Alsaciens résiste encore ...”¹⁷ [25 Jun 2006]

[me to Hilmar] “Am going to post you a copy of a letter just received from [the editor] saying that NDBA’s booklet 47 has not been published yet [it was published] and that no mistake regarding the authors has ever been made [two notices had been published with wrong authorship]. I had to rub my eyes a couple of times to make sure I was reading properly ...” [24 May 2007]

[Hilmar’s reaction] “This is really very strange – but I suppose one should invest one’s time in other things instead of persuading him. Maybe he is really too stupid to understand.” [24 May 2007]

[me to Hilmar] “Interestingly enough, in the foreword, [the editor] writes (end of 2nd paragraph before last) that they are determined to get their copyright respected – something he did not do himself in the past (this was one of the points of friction about photographs, if you remember). Perhaps after all, they learned something ...” [01 Sep 2007]

[me to Hilmar] “NDBA Vol 49: a general index. Unfortunately the bios of Hellerich and Rosenberg are still listed there under my name. So [the] promises for rectifications were just wind in empty pipes ...” [04 Sep 2007]

Hilmar on Waltraut

During our 1968 visit to Daun Observatory (see the paper opening), Waltraut appeared to us as an energetic, almost daredevil woman. I remember Léo Houziaux deeply impressed by her ability to drive her car at night on the winding road down from the Observatory to the city (where we were accommodated) by holding the steering wheel in one hand and the broken switch of her car lights in the other one. She knew the road of course, but still. Try to do this in full daylight.

¹⁷ “You know, all Gaul respects the copyright. All? No! A city populated by irreducible Alsations still resists ...”

She was also practicing good humor. The editors of the proceedings for the 1998 Hipparcos colloquium mention in their preface (Egret & Heck 1999) the following anecdote reported by Waltraut: When asked in a popular lecture about the size of the Universe, Wirtz answered that it was about 7cm, *i.e.* the size of our brain lobes which make us able to reflect on and understand the surrounding universe.

Difficulties of contact with Waltraut appeared when I attempted to get in touch for a more elaborate chapter on Wirtz for the MNHSAO volume. I had to approach Hilmar who answered: “Best use my e-mail for correspondence with Waltraut. She will be delighted to contribute.” [31 Aug 1999] He would first sign the messages as “Hilmar and Waltraut”, becoming after a while “Hilmar (& Waltraut)” [28 Mar 2001], then finally “Hilmar”.

From time to time, in the hundreds of exchanges we had subsequently, brief notes on Waltraut’s worsening state would appear, such as the following one after the Strasbourg talk (cf. above and appendix):

“Thank you very much for arranging this nice stay, and for arranging the talk. I am very sorry that Waltraut isn’t up any more to her usual liveliness, but shielding her from contacts with other people would not make things better.” [06 Feb 2004]

And the situation would deteriorate gradually (non-exhaustive list):

“Actually, Waltraut’s state of mind has become somewhat problematic, and I don’t dare to travel widely, since when attending a conference last month we had to rush home at 2 a.m. from Brussels since she did not like the noisy hotel (well, same with me, but somehow one has to live with such things). [...] My real problem is that I cannot sit there for 8 hours and work, I have to run the household, and every 5 minutes Waltraut will come with another matter, and chase me away from the computer. So things are unfortunately not running very smoothly.” [23 Aug 2004]

“Unfortunately I must say that Waltraut’s health is not the best, and she also fell and broke her hand the day before yesterday, so I am now very anxious to avoid more events of this kind, so I have to always look what she’s doing, and I can spend only some half-hour units per day for my science work. So please excuse the slow progress of my work, I really do what I can.” [20 Jan 2005]

“Otherwise, things are going *más o menos* well, although it has become difficult to make extensive trips with Waltraut.” [06 Jun 2005]

“To tell the truth, Waltraut has really become very sick, and although I still can work most of the day, I simply cannot focus properly on my work. So things are progressing, but very slowly.” [10 Nov 2005]

“I would be happy to write [that] article, although my work progresses extremely slowly – Waltraut not only suffers from her progressing sickness, but has also caught in recent days some viral infection (no, not bird-flu), which means that I have to invest even more time with her.”

[01 Mar 2006]

“Unfortunately the daily things take a lot of time”. [20 Aug 2007]

“Well, everything is going smoothly – although Waltraut in the meantime has become completely dependent on my assistance, which takes a lot of time and does not allow travelling. And it also means that many projects (or even plain reading) are very much delayed.” [29 Sep 2007]

Waltraut passed away on 15 Nov 2007 and, as an illustration of the death notice, Hilmar used a b/w scan of Santa Helena pictured as the Cygnus constellation in Julius Schiller’s “Christian sky” (1627). Hilmar had worked¹⁸ on Robert H. van Gent’s re-edition of Andreas Cellarius’ “*Harmonia Macrocosmica*” (1660), so-called “The Finest Atlas of the Heavens”, including reproduction of Schiller’s work. See also Nath (2014b).

Epilogue

The above gathers together only a few examples of my interactions with Hilmar and there could be many more. Hilmar offered to publish some of my own papers in the publications he was involved with (Heck 2004, 2011a,b) and I have been honored and grateful for that. He was definitely one of those “nice guys” one is happy to meet in life, but one never gets to tell them how much one appreciates to deal with them, humanly speaking. On professional grounds, he will be missed by the literally extra-ordinary historical knowledge he had accumulated, by the numerous contacts he had established and by the amount of projects he could have brought to successful conclusion, had he lived longer. May he continue to inspire us, not only for all the positive facets mentioned, but also as an example of persistence in producing excellent work under adverse conditions of life.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Editors for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this memorial volume with this short note.

¹⁸ “I had spent most of my July time in proofreading the Cellarius facsimile.” [02 Aug 2006]

“Many thanks for the book review [MNHSAO volume]. Too bad that you did not also copy the subsequent page, since I edited (corrected and partly re-wrote) RH Van Gent’s Cellarius Atlas text, for which I got 2700 EUR, but finally quarrelled with the publisher-lady since the glossary I produced was based (too much to her taste) on Wikipedia entries (although I clarified them and corrected errors).” [27 Jun 2007]

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Appendix

Announcement of Hilmar's talk at Strasbourg Observatory on 6 Feb 2004

Long term development of prenovae, postnovae and nova shells.

Vendredi 6 Février 2004, 10h30

Hilmar W. DUERBECK

Vrije Universiteit, Brussels, Belgique

I will present an overview of our knowledge of brightness evolution of classical novae before and after eruption, and will try to derive implications for their relation to nova like stars and dwarf novae ("nova hibernation scenario"). I will also present our knowledge on the flux evolution of nova shells in the decades following nova outbursts.

Ce séminaire sera suivi d'une présentation sur l'histoire de l'Observatoire de Strasbourg :¹⁹

"Strasbourg Observatory – Imperial Germany's model research institute"

I will give an overview of the scientific plans, activities and achievements of Strasbourg Observatory from 1874–1918, and will also briefly mention the work of the directors (Winnecke, Becker, Bauschinger), observers (Schur, Kobold, Wirtz), assistants and PhD students. Besides contributions to the Venus transit expeditions of 1882, and geophysical research in Alsatia, research into the nature of nebulae was the main project that was initiated by Winnecke, and carried through (although with modifications) until World War I put an end to serious scientific work. A few remarks on the activities in 1941–1943 are also given.

¹⁹ This talk will be followed by another one on the history of the Strasbourg Observatory.