

ENCOUNTERS WITH VICTOR AMBARTSUMIAN ONE AFTERNOON AT THE SAN LAZZARO DEGLI ARMENIAN ISLAND AT VENICE

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I do not recall when I had the occasion to meet Prof. Ambartsumian for the first time. His name was already known to me as one of the greatest astrophysicists as early as in 1939 at the beginning of my career as an astronomer. I believe however that I was introduced to Prof. Ambartsumian a few years after the end of the war, at one of the General Assemblies of the IAU, either at Zurich in 1948 or at Rome in 1952. Later the occasions for our encounters increased, both in Padua and in Yerevan, Armenia.

I remember in 1966 at a meeting on "Active Galaxies" organized by the Byurakan Observatory, I had the opportunity during an excursion to Lake Sevan to discuss with him our common research programs. I was occupied then with the variable stars of the Orion Nebula and, in particular, the "flare stars" that are found in great numbers there. I was extending the search of such stars to the Pleiades, Hyades and other open clusters. This work followed the research initiated at Tonantzintla by Guillermo Haro and at Byurakan under the leadership of Prof. Ambartsumian. We had the occasion to speak of these enigmatic stars with a view towards future collaboration in this area.

Other occasions for mutual encounters were not lacking in the following years. I want to dwell for a moment on the visit that Prof. Ambartsumian made to Padova in 1969, where we had invited him to give a Seminar in the course of one of his visits to Italy. He had expressed the wish to visit Venezia, the Island of S. Lazzaro degli Armeni, a charming place in Lagoon, where the convent of the Padri Armeni Mechitaristi is located. It was founded two and a half centuries ago by the Armenian Pietro de Mansig (called Mechitar) with the purpose of assisting the Armenians, numerous at that time in Venice, who had fallen in distress from poverty or illness. After some time the con-

vent became quite prosperous and today it is conducted by the Armenian priests called "Mechitarists". It is one of the most important Centers of Armenian art, culture and education; a real pearl of the Orient in Lagoon.

It was Saturday and on the next day, after a telephone call to the Island to announce the visit, we went from Padova to Venezia and from there, in the afternoon, to Lido. A gondola was waiting there to take us to the Island. As we were approaching San Lazzaro Island we were surprised to see a crowd of people on the walls surrounding the island. They appeared to be cheering towards us. The crowd was composed of Armenian Friars, Seminarists and students, living in the convent. The fame of Prof. Ambartsumian and his work on behalf of his countrymen, as the President of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, was well known to the Mechitarist Fathers. The announcement of his visit was therefore received with the greatest pleasure and Prof. Ambartsumian was welcomed as a most distinguished guest by the Rector and the entire Armenian Community. There was a solemn reception in the Central Hall with an exchange of complimentary speeches (in the Armenian language). A parchment was offered to Prof. Ambartsumian in memory of his visit. Under the guidance of the Fathers we were then conducted on a tour of the treasures of the Island: the wonderful gardens and the ancient Convent. Especially impressive was the Library, so rich in Armenian books, of incunabula and of more than two thousand Armenian manuscripts decorated with beautiful miniatures, real masterpieces of the IX—XI centuries. We also saw many other documents concerning the History of Ancient Armenia.

I well remember that Prof. Ambartsumian was much moved by the demonstration of esteem and affection offered by his countrymen, living in this remote outpost of Armenian Culture. The people were far from their own country, mostly in consequence of the dreadful Turkish persecutions of 1915 and the „Diaspora“ which followed. The Armenians are always and everywhere united by the common love for their ancient country, far above any political or religious differences. The visit of Prof. Ambartsumian was absolutely unexpected and yet all appeared as if it were awaited for a long time.

The hours were passing rapidly and finally in the late afternoon we were taken with a motorboat from S. Lazzaro to Venezia to visit the Armenian College of the Mechitarist Fathers in Palazzo Zenobio ai Carmini. The College is frequented by young Armenian students coming from every part of the world to complete their classical studies and learn the language and the history of Armenia. There was again great excitement concerning the visit of Prof. Ambartsumian and a reception

by the Director of the College was held in his honour. And there was also another surprise: in one of the beautiful rooms of the Palazzo we saw a portrait of Prof. Ambartsumian hanging on one of the walls close to that of the great Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian.

It was an unforgettable day and we returned to Padova late in the evening.

Since that time occasions for meeting Prof. Ambartsumian were relatively frequent. In 1967 he was elected Foreign Member of the Academy of Lincei, the most prestigious Academy of Sciences and Letters in Italy. I met him in Samos on the occasion of the celebration of the XXIII century since the birth of Aristarchus. He invited me to visit the Byurakan Observatory and so I had the opportunity of seeing some of the most picturesque localities in Armenia and, at the same time, getting better acquainted with research carried out at the Byurakan Observatory. This was an occasion to create, under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union and the Academy of Lincei, a convention for a common programme of research and exchange of Astronomers between the Observatory of Asiago and that of Byurakan. This coordination has been very fruitful.

What else shall I say. I will recall here the important studies made by Prof. Ambartsumian and his collaborators, under his strong impulse, on "flare stars" in nebulae, associations and open clusters, those on the "fuors", the enigmatic variables of the FU Orionis-type and on the nebular variables. He has not only proposed original interpretations of the phenomena occurring in these young stars, but has solved with an ingenious statistical treatment the problem of revealing, with yet uncomplete data of observation, the total number of flare stars probably present in a given cluster. This is really a marginal aspect of the researches of Prof. Ambartsumian. Other Colleagues will certainly relate in this issue his fundamental contributions in all of fields of physical and mathematical astronomy, from binary stars to planetary nebulae, from stellar statistics to celestial mechanics, from theoretical astrophysics to cosmology.

In conclusion, I am happy to convey, in the name of my Italian colleagues, their best wishes to Professor Ambartsumian on the occasion of his 80-th birthday for a long, happy and active life. Besides his high scientific merits I shall always remember his human qualities, his amiability, kindness and goodness towards all his colleagues and disciples.

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