

GUNTER FUHR

1907-1993

Dr K Gunter Fuhr was born in Germany where his father was a Geheimrat member (privy councillor) in the pre-Hitler era. During the thirties he married Baba Wallace, a South African studying in Germany after receiving a doctorate in physics and chemistry.

The story of the emigration of the Fuhr family is interesting: One day, Gunter returned from work and said to his wife: "We must emigrate, let us go to South Africa." His motivation was vintage Fuhr – he had ordered some copper wire and was told that it had become unobtainable. Ever an independent thinker, he concluded that Germany was preparing for war and that it was time to leave.

Our first conversation, some 46 years ago, took place in a telescope dome on the grounds of the old Union Observatory. Members of the Transvaal Centre of the Astronomical Society were looking at the usual astronomical showpieces and were discussing telescopes. He turned to me and said: "You know, this is almost as good as a musical evening". These few words tell us much about the man – his love of astronomy and of music as well as a certain child-like ability to enjoy good experiences to the utmost.

In the years which followed our meeting we saw much of each other because we shared a liking for amateur astronomy as opposed to recreational astronomy. For those who do not know the difference, it should be explained that recreational astronomers are those good folks who enjoy the splendour of the heavens whereas amateur astronomers become involved in formal observing, and report their observations to scientific institutions. Be that as it may, Gunter and I and a few others found much to do in the field of amateur astronomy. Gunter concentrated on occultation work whereas I combined occultation timings with variable star observing. For some years Gunter was the most prolific occultation observer in South Africa and did exceptionally good work in the esoteric field of occultation reappearances, a post-midnight activity.

Gunter was forever striving to improve the performance of his equipment and used to consult me frequently because he had a somewhat exaggerated opinion of my knowledge of telescope optics. During these sessions, his sheer gentlemanliness and sense of humour never failed to impress me.

He was kindness itself and never hesitated to accommodate others. I have fond memories of the two of us erecting my 12½-inch Cassegrain telescope for the first time and sharing the experience of "first light" at midnight during a not too warm Highveld night.

When the Fuhr family left for Cape Town they created a gap but we kept in touch. Fortunately, my work and the presence of a son in the city caused me to visit Cape Town frequently. Almost invariably I contacted the Fuhr family and was invited to join them whenever time permitted. I am told that Gunter used to look forward to these visits and would prepare a little list of technical topics that he wished to discuss. Almost invariably we would run out of time and would have to adjourn the discussion until the next meeting. Often as not we would consume a quantity of one of Gunter's favourite wines, helping to make these meetings a great pleasure.

It was sad to witness the steady deterioration of Gunter's physical condition but it was also heartening to see how he would rise to meet every new handicap that his condition imposed on his occultation observing and how he would improvise in order to overcome these difficulties. His family was, quite understandably, worried lest the frail old man injure himself while observing but I am quite sure that observing occultations was good for him and gave him an interest that made his infirmities easier to bear. During his last year these became too much for him. After his death, I went through his records in order to report his last year of observations to the International Lunar Occultation Centre in Tokyo. There were no less than 73 entries, mentioning observing difficulties. Of these, 37 were due to his condition. In this is a salutary lesson for our rising generation of amateurs.

During our last meeting he told me that he had lived long enough and was ready to die. Such a statement tells us much about his intellectual honesty. Gunter was a role model for me and his memory will not fade.

We never discussed cosmology but it would be wonderful to think that he is finally in a position to satisfy his inquiring mind and to find out from his Creator what it is that makes the Universe tick.

Danie Overbeek.