OBITUARY

Dr Antoni Przybylski

He was born in Rogaczow, Poland, in 1913, and attended the University of Poznan, where he gained his first degrees and became a Research Assistant at the University Observatory. When the war broke out he served as an army officer at the defence of Warsaw. Taken prisoner by the Germans, he was sent to a POW camp in Mecklenburg in West Germany, but in 1941 he managed to escape and return to his parents’ home in Poland. The risk of arrest by the Gestapo was great, and he decided to make for Switzerland. This meant crossing the whole of Germany in wartime, but by travelling mainly at night he successfully accomplished this feat. Interned in Switzerland, he was able to study at the Zurich Polytechnic, where in 1949 he was awarded a Doctorate in Technical Sciences.

At the end of the war Przybylski was unwilling to return to communist-dominated Poland, and decided to emigrate to Australia, where he arrived in 1950. As was the practice at the time, he was under a two-year bond, in his case to the PMG’s Department, and he was digging trenches for cables when a friendly departmental officer brought his credentials to the notice of Dr Richard Woolley, then Director of the Observatory. Woolley gave him a position, then a scholarship, and supervised the thesis for which he obtained his PhD in 1954. The thesis was concerned with some problems in the theory of stellar atmospheres, and attracted a good deal of overseas interest.

On the day Przybylski arrived he was introduced around the Observatory. When the workshop staff heard his name there was a pause, following which someone announced that all those consonants were a bit much, and they were going to call him “Bill”. From that time on “Bill” he was, at any rate on Mt Stromlo.

In 1957 Woolley was succeeded as Director by Bart Bok, and with Bok’s persuasion Przybylski took up observing. His program was made up of stars which possibly had unusual properties, but he could never have imagined anything as unusual as his own star. It is an inconspicuous star, too faint to be seen by eye though just visible in binoculars, number 101,065 in the famous Henry Draper Catalogue. Its peculiarity lies in its chemical composition. Iron and other common elements seem totally absent, and instead its atmosphere is dominated by the rare earth holmium, not yet found in any other heavenly body, not even the sun, and difficult enough to study on earth. With all the progress of recent years in the study of element synthesis and element abundances, we are still far from understanding why holinium should be so dominant in this star of Przybylski’s, and it seems likely to remain an astrophysical enigma for years to come. Certainly his star is the most peculiar star yet found.

Przybylski contributed of course to other branches of astronomy. He did some of the very first work on satellite orbits, found other most interesting stars, and was a pioneer in determining element abundances in individual stars in the Magellanic Clouds. This was in addition to his work on stellar atmospheres, comets, and variable stars. His work has stood the test of time well, and he leaves behind him an enduring reputation.

After retirement he lived in John XXIII College, where he proceeded to a second BSc, granted in 1984, in this time in the natural sciences — botany, zoology and geology. He tutored the undergraduates in mathematics and physics, and was a popular and well-loved figure.

Przybylski was a warm-hearted, generous man without an ounce of malice, deeply religious, though not conspicuously so, and Polish to the core. His friends will remember little idiosyncrasies of speech and manner with great affection. He was a staunch supporter of the Catholic Church and a highly respected member of the Polish community in Canberra, where he made in particular an outstanding contribution to the Polish Ex-Servicemen’s Association. He will be remembered too for his most generous support of many educational and charitable organisations both in Australia and abroad.

Ben Gascoigne

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