

In Memoriam: Izold Pustylnik (17 March 1938 – 2 May 2008)



Izold Pustylnik, eminent astronomer and senior research associate at the Tartu Observatory, died on the early morning of May 2, 2008.

Izold Pustylnik was born on March 17, 1938 in the family of millers in Odessa, Ukraine. There he graduated from the secondary school with high grades and cum laude from Odessa University. In 1962 he applied for a postgraduate position at the Institute of Physics and Astronomy, Academy of Sciences of the then Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. Remarkably, only three months after starting his postgraduate studies, Pustylnik delivered his first academic seminar paper at the institute in the Estonian language. His skills in acquiring new languages were impressive: in the institute's personnel records from 1992 Pustylnik has rated his command of Russian, Estonian, English and Polish as excellent, and Ukrainian, German and French as languages he could read and translate, and Hungarian as the language he commanded at conversational level.

After his post-graduation studies, Pustylnik defended Candidate of Science degree at the University of Tartu in 1958 and DSc at Saint Petersburg State University in 1994.

During the entire time he worked at the Tartu Observatory, Pustyl'nik researched close binary systems, because these stars, orbiting very close to each other around a common centre of mass, help us learn more about stars than can be done by studying single stars. He even defined a new stellar category—gas-eclipsed close binaries, which are binaries orbiting around each other in the common gas envelope. Though mainly a theoretician, Pustyl'nik was actively and over a long period in his earlier academic career also involved in observing binary systems.

In recent years Pustyl'nik took interest in famous astronomers and has published, together with Vitalii Bronshten, a monograph on Ernst Julius Öpik, one of the leading Estonian astronomers. Pustyl'nik also wrote about Stanislavs Vasilevskii, the Latvian astronomer whose talent remained hidden in the tumult of the 20th century, and investigated thoroughly the life and work of Erich Schoenberg, the Estonian astronomer who worked at the Tartu Old Observatory.

Pustyl'nik's interests were not limited to the life and work of famous astronomers; he also attempted to draw parallels between the views of ancient astronomers and contemporary thought. At the 2002 Tallinn conference celebrating the passing of 150 years from the measuring of long meridian arc from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea, which is now known as the Struve Geodetic Arc and which is included into the UNESCO World Heritage List, Izold Pustyl'nik analysed Friedrich Georg Wilhelm Struve's geodetic and astronomical measuring in the light of contemporary astronomical understanding.

In the mid-1970s, during the surge of national awakening in Estonia, astronomer Heino Eelsalu began to trace Estonian national identity, almost lost by then, and focused on the interpretation of various myths and archaeological objects from astronomical viewpoint, laying thus a solid foundation for the field of archaeoastronomy in Estonia. For many younger colleagues this opened a new window to the world, and Eelsalu's enthusiasm fired many, Pustyl'nik among others. He became one of the main organisers of the 2002 International Conference of SEAC (European Society for Astronomy in Culture), which was held in Tartu, Estonia. At the conference he also delivered a weighty paper 'Does modern astrophysics widen the horizons of archaeoastronomy?' (published in SEAC Proceedings, 2002).

Pustyl'nik's fine language skills allowed him to cooperate with astronomers of many countries of the world. His active lifestyle made him noticed and elected in the boards of international organisations. For instance, Pustyl'nik was the member of the board of the Euro-Asian Astronomical Society virtually since the establishment of the society.

Pustyl'nik was also one of the main instigators of Euroscience Estonia. By a cruel irony, Pustyl'nik was gone by the opening of the 2008 international seminar

which he had summoned. The seminar was dedicated to the astronomer Ernst Christoph Friedrich Knorre who worked in Tartu before Struve's era.

Izold Pustynnik will be deeply missed by the people of the Tartu Observatory. He was a fine colleague and interlocutor on scientific issues and life in general.

Tõnu Viik

(translated into English by Kait Tamm)