

SYMPOSIUM “ASTRONOMER NICHOLAE DONICI – 140 YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH”

MAGDA STAVINSCHI

*Astronomical Institute of Romanian Academy
Str. Cutitul de Argint 5, 040557 Bucharest, Romania
Email: magda_stavinschi@yahoo.fr*

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On September 1, 1874, Nicolae Donici one of the most brilliant Romanian astronomers, and founding member of the International Astronomical Union and honorary member of the Romanian Academy, was born in Chisinau, the modern day capital city of Moldova.

This is how he was recommended at the academy meeting of May 23, 1922 to be accepted in its ranks :

“This spring we were surprised by an address of the Romanian Academy of Science in Paris, signed by all outstanding scientists and by a letter from the well known astronomer Camille Flammarion. The Romanian Academy is strongly requesting support, with all the authority of the Romanian government, to save the Astronomical Observatory at Dubosarii-Veci Bessarabia, owned by Mr N. Donici. Neither of us could speak of Mr. Donici, and only a few know of the reputable observatory in Bessarabia, which is an important part of the vast network of observatories around the world. I had a quick look at the Index generalis to examine the organization and work of this Scientific Institute. Today we know that the Astronomical Observatory – the only one we have in Romania – was created and maintained with great sacrifice by Mr. Nicholas Donici and that he is not only a scientist but an enthusiastic researcher in the field of observational astronomy. His work has so far been published as 16 major original papers, all in the Bulletin of the Imperial Academy of Petrograd and the Bulletin of the Astronomical Observatory of Paris.

He was sent by the Petrograd Academy as Head of Mission to observe solar eclipses in Spain (May 28, 1900), in Podang, Sumatra (17 to 18 May 1901), in Odessa (1903), in Cambodia (16 – 17 may 1904), in Aswan (29 to 30 August 1903) and in Theodosia (8 August 1914). He returned to Aswan (14 November 1907) for the transit of Mercury, which showed the tenuous nature of the planets atmosphere – 15 km in height, estimated by Rowland – and analysed the spectrum of a comet at Dubosarii-Vechi in 1916.

Mr. N. Donici is prominent in the scientific world and at the International Astronomical Union held last week in Rome, the committee elected him to two sections of

observational astronomy. This autumn, he is to go to Australia, with his equipment from Dubosarii-Vechim, to observe the solar eclipse, where his guest, the Australian state, will provide maintenance and travel for the duration of his stay in the country. Mr. Nicholas Donici is of Romanian origin and sentiment, from the old Moldovian family Donici, and great great grandfather of the fabulist Andronachi Donici. He is the pride of our nation. Undersigned we propose to you, my colleagues, to be so kind as to elect as honorary member of the Romanian Academy both as a reward for his scientific merits and the sacrifice that has brought them to science and as a tribute to our beloved Bessarabia, whose son is.”

The meeting was chaired by Dimitrie Onciul, the president of the Romanian Academy, and the recommendation was read by Grigore Antipa, Annals of the Romanian Academy 1921–1922.

This is what was known about Donici in 1922, and even if his work had stopped there, his impact on science would have still been significant.

But he continued to work with vigour after being elected as an honorary member of the Romanian Academy, conducting solar eclipse observations from USA to Cambodia, and representing Romania in the International Astronomical Union, which was a founding member. He also proposed new methods and theories in solar physics and for the zodiacal light. Taken by international bodies, many of his reference works have left their mark in both Romania and in international astronomy, but they are little known to us (Stavinschi, 1995).

Of course, the descent of the Iron Curtain, and the barrier that stood for many decades between Romanians either side of the Prut river, may have contributed to his leaving of the country in 1944 and therefore his exclusion from the Academy from 1948 until 1990.

The Symposium marked 140 years since the birth of Nicolae Donici. It proposed to discover the unknowns in the astronomer's life and to bring to the attention of the participants the areas in which he worked.

The Symposium was organized by the Romanian Academy and the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova, with the support of the Romanian Committee for the History, Philosophy of Science and Technology and the Astronomical Institute of the Romanian Academy.

Opening speeches were delivered by the President of the Romanian Academy, Ionel Valentin Vlad, and the first vice-president of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova, Ion Tighineanu.

Then followed a statement from Dr. Thierry Montmerle, General Secretary of the International Astronomical Union, that “such a Symposium coincides with new IAU efforts to reconstruct its history, on the eve of the 100th birthday of its foundation, in 1919.”

A touching moment was the reading of a message received from Maria Roemmich-

Brunswig in Buenos Aires, whose grandmother was the wife of Nicholas Donici. The surprise was all the greater since she was "discovered" just weeks before the Symposium.

The first part of the Symposium was devoted to the astronomers life. Magda Stavinschi, Acad., Vyacheslav Ursachi, Acad., Ion Tighineanu, Ion Holban, and Mugur Ioan Grigori evoked the personality, evoking unknown aspects of his life, gathered from documents, archives, contacts with people who knew him from various meridians.

A special moment was the interview with Mrs. Anca Filoteanu Zoe Donici (at 93 years), the last person to host Nicholas Donici in Bucharest before he permanently left Romania.

Mircea Rusu, Doru Marian Suran, Florinela Georgescu and Ancuta Manea addressed two important aspects of Donicis research: zodiacal light and meteorology - Donici is the founder of the weather network in Bessarabia.

Naturally, several researchers presented scientific work in the areas pursued by Nicholas Donici. Alexandre-Humberto Andre discussed solar observations made at the National Observatory of Brazil; Catalin Beldea, Liliana Dumitru, Cristiana Dumitrache, Stere Oana, Gefry Barad, and Nedelia Smith discussed the solar research in Bucharest; Dan Alin Nedelcu, Mirel Brlan, Marcel Popescu and Octavian Badescu presented their work on asteroids; Julia Malcoci's discussed inexhaustible energy and a group of surveyors presented a mobile platform for astro-geodetic determinations.

Details on the program, including abstracts, presenting speakers and photos and videos taken during the Symposium can be found on site www.astro.ro/donici. We can not conclude this summary of the Symposium without thanking Emma Manu-Donici and Serban Manu, who co-sponsored the event.

REFERENCES

Stavinschi, M.: 1995, *Romanian Astron. J.* **5**, 71.

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