



Figure 26.1: Ondřejov Observatory, built in 1898–1925 by Josef Fanta; Below: Dome of the Schmidt telescope

26. Prague and Ondřejov Observatory

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Before 1900, only few astronomical observatories existed in Bohemia:

- (1) The Astronomical Tower of Clementinum College in Prague was built by Jesuits in 1722, for daily observations reconstructed and equipped in ca. 1751–1755. After suppression of Jesuit order in 1773 it belonged to the state and its director became “Astronomer Royal”. The main tasks were timekeeping, positional astronomy and education of university students. After split of the university onto national parts in 1882, the observatory was incorporated into the German part.
- (2) Astronomical tower of Jesuit college in Komotau (now Chomutov). It served later to the town gymnasium, that is housed in the buildings of the former college.
- (3) The private observatory of Baron John Parish von Senftenberg was situated in garden of his castle in Senftenberg (Žamberk). For scientific work, Parish invited Danish astronomer Theodor Ambders Brorsen. This well equipped observatory consisted of two domes, one intended for an equatorial telescope and other for a meridian circle and geomagnetic and meteorological instruments. Unfortunately, the observatory existed only in 1846–1859.
- (4) The observatory pavilion of the Czech part of the Prague university was built in the garden of the Czech Astronomical institute by professor August Seydler in 1888–1891. After 1900, the institute moved to Prague-Smíchov and a similar pavilion was erected on the new site, where it was in operation until 1949.
- (5) The private observatory of Vojtěch Safarik, professor of chemistry and astronomy at Prague university had address Copernicus Street No. 1 in Prague-Weinberge.
- (6) The private observatory in Ondřejov was founded on January 21, 1898 by Josef Frič, owner and director of a factory producing optical and fine mechanical instruments.

On this day, exactly one year after the untimely death of brother Jan, Josef Frič purchased a considerable area of

land on and around the hill called Manda (528 m above the sea level), on border of the village Ondřejov, about 40 km south-east of Prague. Frič anticipated growing air and light pollution near the large town and so he looked for a distant site south of Prague, but within one day of drive by a horse team. The observations started in a provisional wooden shed in 1900–1901. The villa with laboratory and study rooms was inaugurated in 1905, two domes were built in 1908–1912. The architectural style is an excellent Art Nouveau, designed by Josef Fanta (1856–1954), professor of Prague polytechnics, whose other famous works are Prague main railway station and Peace Memorial of Battle by Austerlitz. Two outstanding personalities inspired brothers Frič to devote the life to astronomy and to build an observatory – Jan Neruda, journalist, writer and poet, and professor Vojtěch Safarik (1829–1902), tireless observer of variable stars.

The west dome housed a double astrograph, developed in 1895–1915 by Josef Frič and František Nušl, professor of astronomy at Prague university. Both astronomers invented and constructed also an astrometric instrument called circumzenital and gained international reputation with it. The prototypes were installed in the small houses with tilt roofs. The central dome was equipped by a telescope with 8-inch objective lens made by Alvan Clark – from bequest of Safarik. Nušl administrated the observatory as director since the beginning until the World War II.

In 1928, Frič donated the observatory to Charles University by occasion of the 10 years anniversary of Czechoslovak Republic. After the constitution of Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in 1953, the Ondřejov observatory became the main part of the Astronomical Institute.

WOLFSCHMIDT, GUDRUN AND MARTIN ŠOLC (ed.): “Astronomy in and around Prague.” Proceedings of the Colloquium of the Working Group for the History of Astronomy in the framework of the scientific meeting of the Astronomische Gesellschaft (AG) in Prag, Monday, September 20, 2004, organized by Gudrun Wolfschmidt and Martin Šolc. Prague (Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Mathematica et Physica, Vol. 46, Supplementum) 2005.