

Some notes on *Leaves of Memory*, the autobiography of Hermann Kobold

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Abstract

We briefly describe the life of the astronomer Hermann Kobold, who lived from 1858 to 1942. He worked at the observatories of O’Gyalla, Strasbourg and Kiel, and was also involved in the observations and reductions of the German Venus transit project, 1874/82. His autobiography spans the time between his youth and his leave from Strasbourg in 1902. The subsequent time as observer and professor in Kiel and long-time editor of the *Astronomische Nachrichten* is not covered. The autobiography *Blätter der Erinnerung* (Leaves of Memory), presented in the subsequent article, was written in his late age when he was already blind, using a special device. We also present some photographs of Kobold and his contemporaries, taken in Göttingen, O’Gyalla, Aiken (South Carolina), and Strasbourg.

1 Introduction

Autobiographies of astronomers are scarce, and each one should be regarded with special interest. Such autobiographies permit a glimpse not only into the life of the author, but also into the “inner life” of an institution, while annual reports just tell about astronomical activities and achievements, and about the arrival and departure of personnel. In official documents, the reasons behind failed projects, movements of personnel, promotions and unsuccessful attempts often remain unexplained. Of course, autobiographies should be treated with care, since they offer just a single perspective.

Kobold’s autobiography merits interest because it illuminates two very interesting places in modern astronomy: it shows some early activities at Nicolaus von Konkoly’s private observatory in O’Gyalla, and describes the activities of the Strasbourg University Observatory for more than 16 years, at a time when Alsace-Lorraine was an imperial province (Reichsland), the newly founded “Imperial University” and its observatory, which was at its foundation the largest and most modern one in Germany.

Furthermore, the autobiography provides a brief report on the German Venus transit expedition to Aiken, South Carolina, in 1882, and some activities in the wake of it.

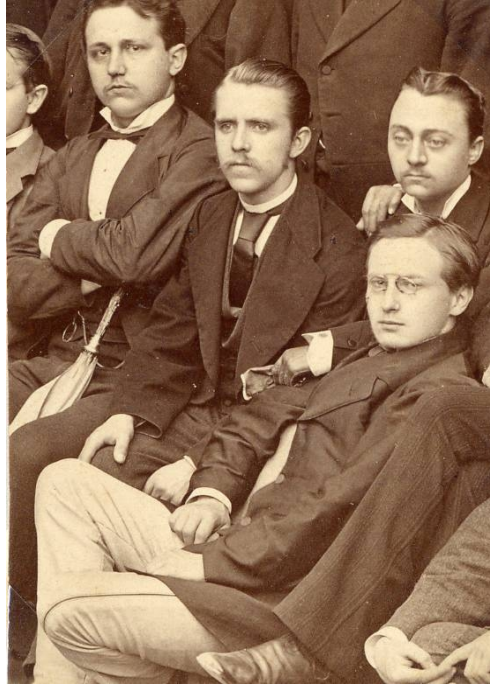


Figure 1: Kobold and fellow students in Göttingen, ca. 1879.

The following paper will present Kobold's complete text in the original language, with brief English footnotes on persons, publications, events, or places. To facilitate the access to this document, we will give a short account of Kobold's scientific life, the origin of his autobiography, and its contents.

2 Kobold – his life

The following information is taken (a) from Kobold's autobiography, as presented in the following article, (b) from Ebell's obituary of Kobold, published in the *Vierteljahrsschrift der Astronomischen Gesellschaft* (Vol. 77, p. 241, 1942), (c) from the listing of Kobold's written estate at the Kiel University Library, compiled by Dr. Lorenzen-Schmidt, and (d) from reminiscences of Kobold's grand-daughter, Hildegard Vollmer.

Hermann Kobold was born on August 5, 1858 in Hanover, Lower Saxony, as the third child out of five of the carpenter August Kobold and his wife Dorothea [Dorette], née Denker. He visited the Auhagen Institute, a private school, from Easter 1865 to Easter 1869, which was followed by a secondary school with scientific bias (Realschule I. Ordnung). From summer 1877 to summer 1880 he studied mathematics and sciences (Fig. 1). Kobold's written estate includes notes based on lecture notes of the Göttingen mathematicians Enneper (2), Schering (4), Schwarz (6), Stern (3), as well as notes on logic (Baumann), physics (Rieke), botanics (Drude), zoology (Ehlers) and mineralogy (Klein). His teacher in astronomy was Wilhelm Klinkerfues (Fig. 2), but since his lectures were available in the form of his book *Theoretische Astronomie*, Kobold did not prepare notes, but rather tried to discuss things with him and assist in the observations. He obtained his Ph.D. on July 16, 1880, with a thesis on a general method to calculate absolute perturbations.



Figure 2: Wilhelm Klinkerfues, Kobold's astronomy professor in Göttingen.



Figure 3: Nicolaus von Konkoly's private observatory in O'Gyalla.



Figure 4: Konkoly, an assistant and Kobold in O'Gyalla.



Figure 5: Konkoly and Kobold in O'Gyalla.

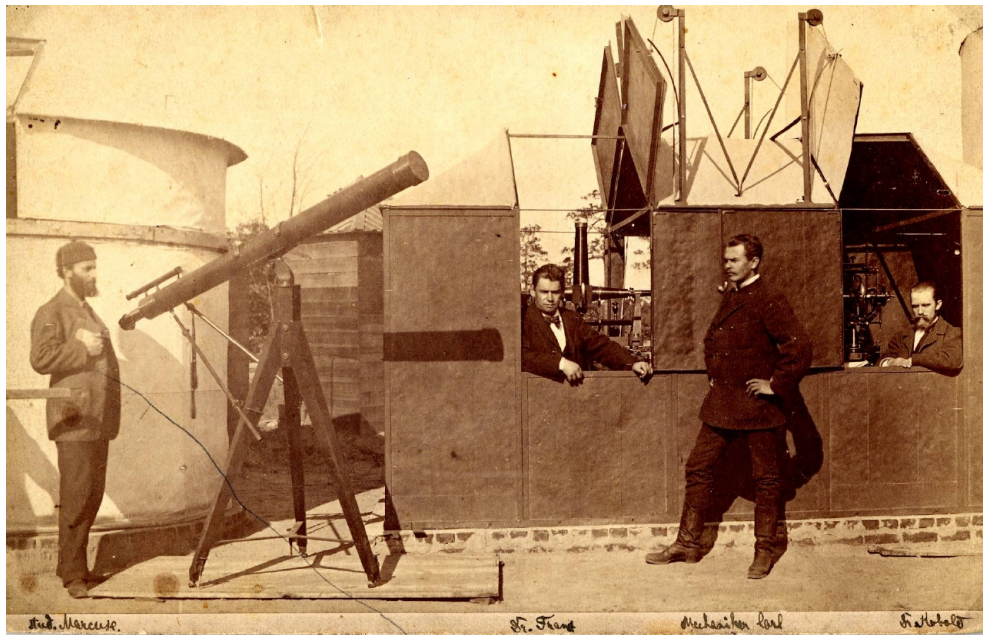


Figure 6: The observing station of the German expedition to observe the Venus transit in Aiken, South Carolina, 1882.



Figure 7: Strasbourg Observatory; in the foreground is one of Kobold's sons.



Figure 8: A portrait of Kobold in Strasbourg, ca. 1899.



Figure 9: Kobold in his study in Strasbourg, ca. 1899.

Soon after, he became assistant to Nicolaus von Konkoly at his private observatory in O'Gyalla (Fig. 3). During more than three years there, he observed comets, planets, and assisted Konkoly (Figs. 4 and 5) in his astrophysical studies and the publication of his first book. Jupiter drawings, as well as tables for the reduction of celestial positions to apparent places 1881, 1882 and 1883 were prepared in O'Gyalla, and are kept in his written estate.

The stay at Konkoly's observatory was interrupted by Kobold's participation in one of the German expeditions to observe the Venus transit of December 6, 1882. Kobold was one of the four expedition members who observed the transit from Aiken, South Carolina (Fig. 6). In 1883, Arthur Auwers, the head of the German commission for the observations, called him to Berlin to participate in calculations and auxiliary observations to test some of the employed heliometers.

On January 27, 1887, Kobold was appointed observer at the University Observatory of Strasbourg, Alsace, thereby replacing Wilhelm Schur, who had been appointed director of Göttingen Observatory. During his first year, Kobold was also the deputy director of the observatory, since the director, August Winnecke, was living in a lunatic asylum already since five years.

In addition to his attempt to continue Winnecke's research program, the determination of positions of nebular spots, Kobold used the 18-inch-refractor to observe cometary positions. He also observed special events like solar and lunar eclipses, stellar occultations, and the opposition of the minor planet Eros in 1900. Using the Strasbourg heliometer which had also been used on the Venus transit expeditions, he measured the solar diameter over many years.

Soon after accepting his Strasbourg position, Kobold married Dora [Dorothea Katharina] Brandt, the bride of his late brother, and they had five children; three died relatively young, two surviving sons became protestant provosts. One of them, Karl Heinrich Kobold, had also five children, among them Hildegard Helga (one of the authors of this article).

In late 1888, Ernst Becker was appointed director, and Kobold assisted in the reduction of observations, the publication of the first two volumes of the *Annals of Strasbourg Observatory*, as well as in pendulum measurements to determine the variation of gravity in various places of Alsace-Lorraine. On February 22, 1888, he obtained his habilitation, and became private lecturer. On March 11, 1900 he was appointed extraordinary professor (Figs. 7-9). Notes of lectures on eclipses, planetary transits, parallax methods, and geodesy that he gave in Strasbourg exist in his written estate at Kiel University Library.

On April 1, 1902, Kobold left Strasbourg to accept a position of observer and extraordinary professor at Kiel Observatory, where the payment was better. The instrumentation in Kiel was poor; however, a new meridian circle was set up in 1904, and used for regular observations from 1905. Since an observer's house on the observatory grounds did not materialize, he bought a house next to the observatory grounds, where he lived till the end of his life.

When on July 13, 1907 Heinrich Kreutz, the editor of the journal *Astronomische Nachrichten* died, Kobold was asked first to edit the next issue, then to become provisional editor, and on April 1, 1908, editor of the *Astronomische Nachrichten*, thus leaving his observing post, but remaining a professor at the university. For 30 years, until October 1, 1938, he was the editor of *Astronomische Nachrichten*, from Vol. 175 to 266. In addition, he edited for some time an "observing circular" (Beobachtungs-Zirkular), a "literary supplement" (Literarisches Beiblatt), and "astronomical transactions" (Astronomische Abhandlungen), a supplement to the main journal.

His task was carried out with the help of several scientific collaborators who had their desks in a large room on the first floor of Kobold's private house at Kiel, Moltkestrasse

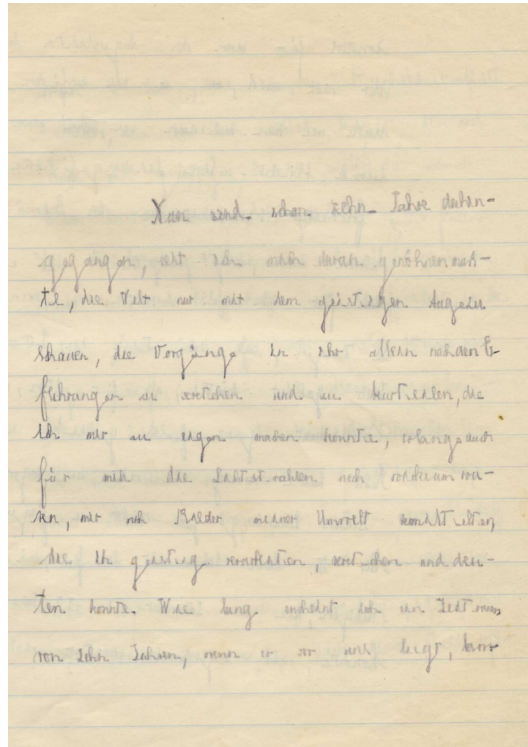


Figure 10: The first page of the manuscript of Kobold's autobiography.

30. The grand-daughter Hildegard remembers a lady and two men (Lieschen [for Elisabeth] Delfs, Mr. [Martin] Ebell and Mr. [Willy?] Strobel). Since Kobold in his later years was suffering from glaucoma, and became blind in 1929, manuscripts were read to him by his assistants, and he could then decide on the procedure. Proofreading was of course carried out by his assistants. Only when he was 80 years of age, and Kiel Observatory was closed, the editorial office of the *Astronomische Nachrichten* moved to the Astronomisches Recheninstitut (Astronomical Computing Office) in Berlin-Dahlem. In the following four years, he worked with an assistant on the reduction of his Strasbourg heliometer observations, funded by the Ministry of education. This project remained unfinished at the time of his death; it was planned to continue the analysis at Strasbourg Observatory (Sternwarte der Reichsuniversität Straßburg). It appears that the material was lost or misplaced in the late stages of World War II. Kobold's last letter to P. Guthnick, Berlin, written a few days before his death, concerns the possible continuation of the reductions and the publication of his heliometer observations.

3 Kobold's *Leaves of Memory*

Kobold wrote his autobiography (Fig. 10) in 1940 in spite of his blindness. He used a wooden frame where horizontal wooden ridges, having the width of a line, covered the underlying paper. One ridge was removed, where the text was to be written on paper. If Kobold was interrupted, a metal slide was used to mark the place where the written line ended. The device was first used when Kobold noted his astronomical observations in darkness. After

he had become blind, in about 1929, it served him in his daily work. Kobold's handwriting, carried out with a soft lead pencil, is not easy to decipher; a son (Karl Kobold) made the first attempt, whose daughter (Hildegard Vollmer) made a clean copy, and whose grandson (Reinhart Vollmer) carried out the optical character recognition, on which the following text is based. The manuscript and the photographs of this article are in the possession of the Vollmer family, and they were digitized by Reinhart Vollmer.

Since Kobold was, at the time of writing, unable to consult any written sources, the text suffers sometimes from deficiencies in the proper way of writing of persons' names, does not give precise references to the quoted literature, and often does not give exact years. With the help of some colleagues and archives, the CD version of *Deutscher Biographischer Index*, as well as the *Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog*, one of the editors (HWD) has identified all persons in the text, and clarified some other geographical and linguistic matters.

Acknowledgments

We want to express our sincere thanks to Felix Lühning, whose historical studies about Kiel Observatory made the existence of the text known in astronomers' circles. Without his pioneering work, this treasure of an astronomical autography would have rested much longer in oblivion. Information on Kobold's written estate which is kept at the University library of the Christian-Albrechts-Universität Kiel was provided by Dr. K. Erdei. The authors acknowledge the willingness of the editor of the *Journal of Astronomical Data*, Chris Sterken, to accept the text in its original form, and thank the referee, Dieter B. Herrmann, who checked the both this introduction and the editorial apparatus of the autobiography.