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BOOK REVIEW

“...eine ausnehmende Zierde und Vorthail” – Geschichte der Kieler
Universitätssternwarte und ihrer Vorgängerinnen 1770 – 1950
Felix Lühning

Wachholtz Verlag, Neumünster, 752 p., hardcover, with numerous b&w figures, 2007, ISBN 978-529-02497-9, 35,00 EUR

This book comprises the habilitation thesis submitted by F. Lühning to the Faculty of Mathematics of Hamburg University in 2004. Due to financial support from various organizations, it was issued in a very attractive form as a special publication of the Society for the history of the city of Kiel. The nice layout, the graphical sketches of buildings, instruments, and astronomical connexions, often designed by the author, and the scientifically precise text, written with a sense of humor, make a pleasant reading, in spite of sometimes quite extensive descriptions of architectural details or ‘operating instructions’ for meridian circles etc. I have rarely read such an appealing text on astronomical history.

The single chapters deal with the beginnings of astronomy in Kiel (1770–1820), Schrader’s giant telescope from the late 18th century, Altona Observatory (1823–1850), the first years of the *Astronomische Nachrichten*, the last years of Altona Observatory (1850–1872), Bothkamp Observatory (1870–1914), the genesis of Kiel Observatory (1874–1880), the era of Krueger (1880–1896), the Kiel Chronometer Observatory (1893–1913), the era of Harzer (1897–1925), the era of Rosenberg (1927–1934), the decline of Kiel Observatory (1935–1950), and the *Astronomische Nachrichten* under Kobold (1907–1938). The book is concluded with a glossary of technical terms, biographical sketches of known and unknown *dramatis personae*, as well as a list of references.

The author outlines lively sketches of people that were astronomically active in Altona, Kiel and its surroundings over a time interval of 200 years. To achieve this task, he has studied many files from the Secret State Archive Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin), the Schleswig-Holsteinisches State Archive (Schleswig) and the Hamburg State Archive, from which he quotes extensively. He also has evaluated private documents and has interviewed surviving witnesses of the 1930s and 1940s. He has located remote sources: for example, the son of the founder of the *Astronomische Nachrichten*, Richard Schumacher, served for some years as an assistant at the Chilean National Observatory, and had married Marie Bulling, a girl of German descent. From her “meagre diary entries” of that time (published in Valparaiso in 2004), the author suspects a “convenience marriage”.

Nevertheless, unreliable sources can provide a false picture: the interviewed custodian notes that the wife of the last official observatory director, Hans Oswald Rosenberg, was “Verena Borchardt, a Jewess from St. Petersburg” (p. 583). This is more than incorrect. The family lived for some years in Moscow (not St. Petersburg), because her father was a representative of various companies, especially his grand-father’s *Königsberger Thee-Compagnie*. In 1880, his daughter Helene was born there – who later married the Kiel astronomer Wirtz. In 1882, the Borchardt family moved to Berlin, where the father became a banker, and where Verena was born. The family was “of reformed confession, of Jewish origin” (Borchardt, Heymel, Schröder: Marbacher Katalog Nr. 29, 1978): she was “a Jewess” in Nazi terminology only.

On page 583 too, Wirtz’ capricious political views are quoted: “The day when the French troops entered Strasbourg was the happiest one in my life”, for which Theiss’ paper of 1999 is

quoted, and it is stated “source not given”. Now, Theiss uses a study of Duerbeck and Seitter (1990), where the precise reference in the *Kiel Acta* is given. Another overlooked (although not very informative) source is the voluminous edition of the collected letters (München 1994–2002) of Rudolf Borchardt, the poetical brother of “Vera” Rosenberg and “Lene” Wirtz.

Another series of peculiar statements refer to the *Astronomische Nachrichten* (p. 666): Neither did they publish, after 1945, “sometimes only Russian articles”, nor after 1983 “only articles in English”: some “German” astrometric articles appeared after that year, which will presumably stand the test of time better than the plethora of “English” articles, dealing mainly with cosmology. Totally fabricated is the author’s statement that the journal is now published by “the Astronomical Computing Centre [sic] in Heidelberg”.

In spite of these slightly critical notes on some irrelevant details, I can wholeheartedly recommend this book: it is an indispensable source of information for anyone who is interested in the history of astronomy in German-speaking lands in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century.

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