

## Obituary

### Eric Hugo Strach, 1914–2011

With the death of Eric Strach at the age of 96 amateur astronomy has lost an outstanding and meticulous solar observer – and medicine an innovative and dedicated orthopaedic surgeon.

Eric Hugo Strach was born into a close knit Jewish family on 1914 October 21 in Brno, Moravia, in the last years of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. 1918 saw the birth of the Czechoslovak Republic of which he and his family became citizens. His father Cornelius owned an umbrella shop in town and Eric's happy childhood years were spent in Brno, subsequently enrolling as a medical student at Prague University. Following graduation in 1938 he was invited to spend a holiday with a friend in Paris, where he met and became friendly with the French family. The deteriorating political situation in Europe caused his parents to dissuade him from returning home, and as he had no work permit his French friends were instrumental in helping him with board and lodging.

Having finally obtained a work permit Eric worked as a resident medical officer in a sanatorium in Dreux, south west of Paris. With the German invasion of France in 1940 the situation became progressively more difficult and Eric answered his call-up to the Czech army in Agde in the South of France. From there he set sail as a private in the Czech forces, arriving in Liverpool some two weeks later. Luckily a cousin living in London was to offer him hospitality and assistance. Later in the war Eric obtained the post of Senior House Surgeon at Chorley Hospital, Lancs., subsequently moving to Wigan Infirmary. Whilst there he made the acquaintance of a refugee family from Prague who introduced him to their son's English teacher, a certain Margaret Forshaw. Following a whirlwind romance Eric and Margaret married on 1945 January 27, a date which later acquired a poignant significance as it became Holocaust Memorial Day.

By now Eric was working as surgical registrar in a Liverpool hospital. With the end of the war

in Europe he answered a call for doctors to help with a typhus epidemic amongst the inmates of the liberated Nazi holding camp of Terezin, Czechoslovakia. On arrival in Prague, he learned that his parents, sister and her two young children had all been taken to concentration camps and had perished. With the epidemic successfully dealt with he tried to get work in Prague, with the hope that his wife would be able to join him once the situation became more settled. He only succeeded in obtaining a job in a provincial town some distance away. In the meantime he

described a harrowing journey across a war-torn and devastated central Europe, to deliver the new wonder drug penicillin to a severely war-wounded relative in a Slovakian sanatorium. On starting his new job he became progressively disillusioned by the inexorable move of Czechoslovakia towards a communist dictatorship, and after a perilous journey back to England was able to rejoin his wife and resume his interrupted surgical career.

In the mid 1950s Eric was appointed Orthopaedic Consultant to the St Helens Group of hospitals, where he developed a lifelong interest in the complex group of developmental disorders constituting spina bifida. His great rapport with children rendered him very suited to this demanding work. He devised innovative callipers to assist the mobilisation of these patients, and also a pressure relieving shunt to diminish pressure effects on the brain. Many sufferers from this condition, now in their adult years, will remember Eric Strach with gratitude and affection.

Eric's young son, Steven, had become interested in astronomy and influenced his father in taking up the same interest as a hobby. From the late 1950s onwards astronomy played a huge role in Eric's life. Together with his son, Eric constructed a small 4" [102mm] reflector from a purchased kit. He became increasingly interested in solar astronomy and joined the BAA in 1965. He read Bill Baxter's book *The Sun and the Amateur Astronomer* and built his own observatory on the lines of Baxter's. Eric's wife Margaret and her brother were acquaintances (from schooldays) of Harold Hill, that most meticulous of amateur lunar and solar observ-

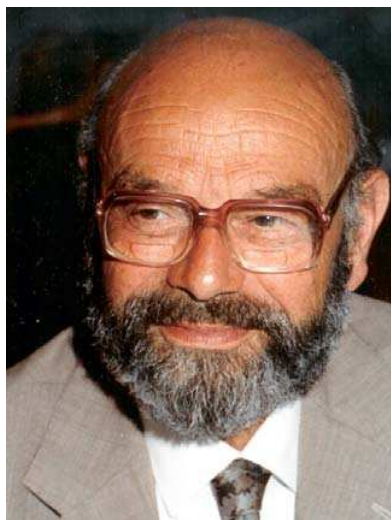


Photo courtesy Helen Scott.

ers. Eric soon became a good friend of Harold Hill and received valuable tuition from him in the art of sketching and recording solar observations. Hill had built his own spectrohelioscope and as he no longer used his excellent 12" [305mm] reflector it was acquired by Eric together with its housing dome.

By now Eric had also obtained an excellent 3" refractor and had built solar projection equipment. Solar observations began in earnest and he was soon submitting reports to the BAA Solar Section, whose Director at the time was Bill

Baxter. Eric read Horace Dall's article in the *BAA Journal* on constructing a prominence telescope. He obtained a 4Å H-alpha filter and built his own prominence scope. Some years later Eric acquired a Daystar H-alpha narrow band filter (0.65Å), enabling him to study and record the solar surface with its filaments, plages and flares in far more detail.

Eric also became interested in radio astronomy and with the help of friends from the Liverpool Astronomical Society (LAS) erected in his back garden a 'switch phased radio interferometer' which facilitated the monitoring of solar prominences as the Sun passed between the aerial beams. These radio prominences were used as an alarm for visual observations. Eric used the system for several years to complement his white light and H-alpha observations. For 50 years Eric observed the Sun whenever the weather permitted and amassed a comprehensive record of drawings and images of solar activity. For many years he provided *The Astronomer* magazine with a detailed monthly report of his observations, as well as accounts and images appearing on a regular basis in the *BAA Journal's* Solar Section notes; also papers submitted to the journal dealing with innovative solar topics, diversifying occasionally to include a very original and interesting paper on the subject of 'Astronomy and Medicine' (*JBA 92*, p. 164).

For his solar work, in 1999 Eric received the BAA's Merlin Medal and Gift, and in 2009 he was awarded the prestigious Walter Goodacre Medal and Gift.

In recent years Eric moved effortlessly from emulsion to digital imaging, and as Lyn Smith notes in her moving tribute to him (*Journal*, 119(5), 2009 October) he was among the first to begin CCD imaging. Then as she explains, images were processed in his camera software, con-



Photo courtesy David Galvin.



verted to a Tiff file, further processed in 'Paint Shop', the final image converted to a jpg file and saved on computer – all this when aged over 90! It was only in the last two years that increasing infirmity forced Eric (reluctantly) to relinquish his solar work.

Eric's lifelong fascination with total eclipses of the Sun began when he joined the S.S. *Monte Umbe* cruise liner, sailing from Liverpool to observe the 7-minute long solar eclipse of 1973 June 30 off the coast of Mauritania, West Africa. He became interested in the elusive shadow bands associated with total eclipses, attempting to record these on subsequent expeditions. Success was achieved on the island of Curaçao, in the Netherlands Antilles, during the total eclipse of 1998 February 26. A video camera was suspended from a tripod, pointing downwards at a white recording surface. The result exceeded his wildest expectations, showing clearly the different alignments of the wave pattern both before and after totality.

Not that Eric's interests were exclusively oriented towards the Sun. Following retirement from professional work in 1979, he became interested in observing and timing grazing occultations of the Moon. He was indefatigable in his pursuit of this new interest and a 'graze' in the small hours of the morning was no deterrent to him travelling many miles to view and record the event.

I recollect on one memorable occasion in 1989 travelling with him and others to a field in the vicinity of a village with the colourful name of 'Flyford Flavell' in Worcestershire to view a grazing occultation during a total eclipse of the Moon. The sky was totally clear throughout the event and successful timing of the disappearances and reappearances of the star was achieved; driving back to Liverpool as dawn was breaking, Eric showed no sign of fatigue and in fact continued a lively discussion of our findings. We had not been aware of other observers along the line of the graze, but on reviewing their results at a later date were able to fill in a missing section of their record.

Eric was a faithful and dedicated member of the LAS for over 50 years. For several decades he served tirelessly on its Council and for three years between 1980 and 1993 was President. During his presidency in 1981 he was instrumental in organising and guiding the Society through its eventful centenary celebrations. Many of us embarking on an interest in astronomy appreciated the help and support that Eric provided.

Early in the 1990s he made the acquaintance of members of an amateur Czech astronomical society in the provincial town of Vlasim some 50 miles southeast of Prague. He had the excellent idea of seeking to have them twinned with the LAS. This met with universal approval, and the liaison culminated in a visit in 2000 by members of the Vlasim society to Liverpool followed by a reciprocal visit of LAS members to Vlasim in 2001. The hospitality afforded us included a visit to the Ondrejov Observatory near Prague and the fascinating Stefanik Observatory on Prague's Petrin Hill. On learning of Eric's death the Vlasim group sent the LAS a moving tribute.

The dreadful fate of Eric's close family at the hands of the Nazis had naturally affected both him and Margaret over the years. In Eric's



**LAS group observing the total eclipse of the Sun on Chwaka Beach, Zanzibar, 1976 Oct 23. Shadow band screen in front of group. Left to right: Eric Jones, Alan Scott, Derek Boulton, Graham Broadbent, Steve Taylor, Eric Strach. Photo courtesy Dr Eric Jones.**

words the pain was shelved and put in the background, and only his close friends were aware of the deep seated anguish he continued to experience. The enormity of his loss was of course never forgotten and throughout the communist era in Czechoslovakia he retained the hope that someday it might be possible to commemorate his family's fate and pay them the homage they and others of his old homeland had been denied.

The opportunity arose with the fall of the communist regime in 1989, following subsequent visits to his maternal grandparents' home town of Slavkov (*aka* Austerlitz). It was apparent that the local synagogue and Jewish cemetery were in urgent need of renovation. Following a prolonged round of conferences with representatives of the Prague Ministry of Culture, Slavkov town authorities, and the Jewish Council, it was finally agreed to clean up the cemetery, and erect a commemorative stone dedicated to the Slavkov victims of the Holocaust. Sometime later funds became available to renovate the old synagogue. Two moving inaugural ceremonies celebrated the completion of this work, both attended by members of Eric's close family, children and grandchildren, and other relatives who had suffered and sustained family losses under the Nazis, some arriving from far flung corners of the world, as well as local and foreign dignitaries. Eric put enormous efforts into this task, and rightly considered it the culmination of his life's work.

Eric died peacefully in the early hours of 2011 January 10, greatly mourned by Margaret, his loving wife of 66 years, his daughters Helen and Angela, his son Steven, and six grandchildren; also mourned by his many friends in the orthopaedic world and the many friends and acquaintances who shared his passion for astronomy. I would like his daughter Angela to have the last word when she writes: 'In his latter years, with

his characteristic tenaciousness, he continued to observe the Sun, record and photograph his findings until he literally could not stand up any more. His will to live was equally strong right to his last days, and we can truly say he got everything he could out of his life as well as giving back in equal measure. He was determined, optimistic and indomitable to the end.'

#### Acknowledgments

I am greatly indebted to Eric's daughters Angela and Helen for their assistance in the compilation of the above account, also for contributions from David Forshaw, Eric Jones, David Galvin, Gerard Gilligan and Rob Johnson, members of the Liverpool Astronomical Society.

**Murad Ghorbal**

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