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Otto Heckmann

1901–1983

Otto Heckmann, past Director General of the European Southern Observatory (1962–1969), President of the International Astronomical Union (1967–1970), and the Astronomische Gesellschaft (1952–1957), Professor of Astronomy and Director of the Hamburg Observatory (1941–1962), died on May 13, 1983.



Prof. Otto Heckmann

Photograph: Dr. Peter Lamersdorf

The European Southern Observatory has particular reason to be grateful to Otto Heckmann whose creative impulse was the essential contribution to the final realization of this European organization.

Born on June 23, 1901 in Opladen, he early developed his interest in astronomical problems. F. Küstner at the University of Bonn introduced him into classical positional astronomy. He very probably formed his scientific style. After having received his Ph. D. at Bonn, however, he soon followed an invitation by H. Kienle to Göttingen, where he became acquainted with modern astrophysical problems.

As an excellent observer he soon could improve the accuracy of photographic photometry to a hitherto unequalled level. Famous were his investigations on the colour-magnitude diagram of open clusters, together with H. Haffner.

Fascinated by E. Hubble's discovery of the redshift-distance relation of extragalactic nebulae in 1929, he resumed earlier investigations on cosmology which finally resulted in the publication of his book, *Theorien der Kosmologie* which later appeared at Hamburg in 1942.

Whoever witnessed the period of intellectual suppression in the late thirties in Germany, can imagine the hazardous enterprise of such a publication at that time.

In 1941 Otto Heckmann received his appointment as the Director of the Hamburg Observatory. First engaged in the accomplishment of the great astronomical catalogues AGK 2 and AGK 3, he soon went into the foot prints of Walter Baade who once had built a large Schmidt telescope. The inauguration of the "Hamburg Big Schmidt" was the initiative step towards a greater task.

Otto Heckmann always kept close contact with Walter Baade. The latter, giving lectures at the Leiden Observatory, in 1953 emphasized to the European astronomers the great importance of a common European observatory "established in the southern hemisphere, equipped with powerful instruments, with the aim of furthering and organizing collaboration in astronomy".

In a fundamental conference with W. Baade in the spring of that year, a number of outstanding European astronomers, among whom A. Danjon from France, P. Bourgeois from Belgium, J. H. Oort from the Netherlands, Sir Harald Spencer-Jones from Great Britain, B. Lindblad from Sweden, O. Heckmann from Germany, decided to realize this project. In the following years, however, it was always Otto Heckmann who pushed things forward, who initiated hope and trust when despondency and depression threatened the success of the plan.

It was again Otto Heckmann who in 1962 after his appointment as Director General and until his retirement in 1969 carried all the burden of the immense task of building up the headquarters of ESO, and the observatory on La Silla in Chile, and to bring it finally into operation.

With Otto Heckmann an outstanding astronomer is gone, honoured by the award to him of the degrees of Dr. h. c. of the University of Aix-Marseille in 1966, Dr. h. c. of the University of La Plata in 1968, and Hon. D. Sc. of the University of Sussex in 1970, by the membership in numerous Scientific Academies of Europe and the Americas, and many gold medals of which as an example only the Bruce Medal of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific will be mentioned.

A. Behr