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Polish astronomers in Odessa University

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The outlines of several distinguished Polish astronomers connected with Odessa University before the First World War are presented.

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1 Poznan Observatory

After the Great War (WWI), Poland reappeared as an independent country (between 1795–1918 it was divided between three empires: Prussian, Russian and Austro-Hungarian). In 1918 several universities existed in its territory, namely: Cracow, Wilno, Lwow (Lviv, Lemberg) and Warsaw.

The decision was made to create a new university in Poznan (Posen). It was also planned to establish meteorological and astronomical observatories. Kazimierz Graff (1878–1950) was approached to do this work and agreed to build a modern observatory devoted to astrophysical studies. Graff himself was an astronomer at Hamburg Observatory (from 1912 located in the Bergedorf borough of Hamburg). He very quickly made designs and drawings of the observatory building, and even offered his library and a small instrument. However, the lack of money did not allow him to order further instruments. Moreover, during his work in Poznan, he was still connected with Hamburg, when he was appointed a professor at the University. Due to these difficulties, he quickly resigned from Poznan (after working in Hamburg, Graff became the director of Vienna Observatory in 1928). The organization of the observatory was then undertaken by a young astronomer, Bohdan Zaleski.

Bohdan Zaleski was born on a family estate in Podolia (Kalisz) on 12th October, 1887. In the years 1900–1905 he attended high school (gymnasium) in Zytomierz, and he later studied astronomy in Odessa (1905–1909), mainly with Prof. A. Kononovich (1850–1910) and A. Orbiski (1860–1928), specializing in astrometry. Later he worked for two years at the Pulkovo Observatory (under I. Bonsdorff (1879–1950), T. Wittram (1854–1915) and F. Renz (1860–1942)) and from Pulkovo he moved to Nikolaev.

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After the War he returned to Poland and in 1921 was appointed a deputy professor of astronomy in Poznan. On 15 January 1922, on the suggestion of Professor Banachiewicz (1882–1954) from Cracow, he was appointed director of the Astronomical Observatory in Poznan. His connections with Cracow Observatory allowed him to defend his PhD in 1923 (on the astronomical longitude and latitude of Poznan Observatory, supervised by Banachiewicz) and in 1926 his D.Sc. (habilitation) on the basis of a declination catalogue of 486 stars observed by him.

Several new instruments were bought and the observatory started its scientific work, as well as having a teaching role. Bohdan Zaleski, the effective founder and the first director of the Poznan Observatory, died on 6 January 1927.

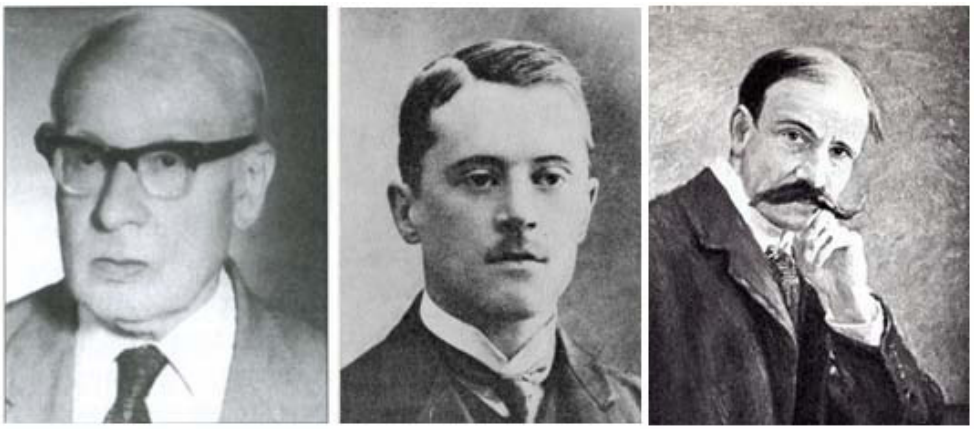


Figure 1 (Left to right) Prof. Józef Witkowski, Bohdan Zaleski, Prof. Maurycy Pius Rudzki.

Józef Witkowski was born in Odessa in 21 February, 1892. He completed the classical gymnasium education in Odessa and studied astronomy there, and his first five years of scientific activity were also connected with the city. In 1916 he received the university candidate degree after presenting his thesis "On the Charlier frequency curves of types A and B in application to proper motion of solar spots". His scientific interests were connected mainly with comets, both theoretically and observationally.

In 1919 he arrived in Cracow where he spent the next ten years, continuing his works with comets, the occultation of stars by the Moon, and photometry of variable stars. He also helped Professor Banachiewicz in editorial work (Acta Astronomica, Supplemento ad Anuario Cracoviensis), and progressed through all the steps of his scientific career. In 1929 he arrived in Poznan as the director of the Observatory and Professor of Astronomy at the University. He occupied these positions until his retirement in 1962. During his directorship, the observatory developed work in celestial mechanics, geographic latitude observations, observation of artificial earth satellite etc., and became one of the most important astronomical centers in Poland. Thus, Poznan Observatory developed and prospered under astronomers educated in Odessa.

2 Cracow Observatory

Maurycy Pius Rudzki was the first person to call himself a professor of geophysics. He held the Chair of Geophysics and Meteorology at the Jagiellonian University (1896) and established the Institute of Geophysics (1895), while from 1902 he was the director of the Astronomical Observatory. Maurycy Pius Tomasz Rudzki was born on 28 December 1862 in Uhrynkowce near Czortkow in Podolia, on the family estate. His high school (gymnasium) took place in Tarnopol, Warsaw, and Kamieniec Podolski, where he passed the final examinations.

He studied mathematics in Lvov University (1882–1883) and then science (physics under Josef Stefan, geology under Eduard Suess and astronomy under Edmund Weiss) in Vienna University (1883–1886). He obtained a doctorate on the basis of the thesis "Beitrag zur Kenntniss der podolischen Sylurformation" (Vienna, 1886).

In the years 1886–1889, he performed individual studies of mathematics and physics on the estate of his brother, having decided that it is necessary to possess good knowledge of them for doing science. In order to have a better position in the university, in 1890 he obtained a master's degree in geography at Kharkov University. In the years 1891–1895 he took the position of docent in Odessa University (this was a private position, not financed by the state).

He was invited to take the Chair of Geophysics and Meteorology at the Jagiellonian University and from 1902 he was director of the Cracow Astronomical Observatory, and in 1903 the founder of a seismological observatory in Cracow. His major achievements are really very significant: he quantitatively modelled the rebound of continents after the ice ages (1899, 1907), and he was the first scientist who proposed continental drift (in the book "Physics of the Earth", Polish edition in 1910, in German in 1911). He wrote the book "Theoretical Astronomy" (1914) in two volumes; in the last chapter (XXIV) he described figures of equilibrium of rotating liquid bodies, and in 1902 he wrote a paper ("Note sur loi de la temperature dans un corps celeste gazeux"), which is quoted in Chandrasekhar's monograph.

As can be easily seen, several astronomers educated in Odessa played important roles in the development of Polish astronomy.

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