ASTRONOMICAL SCRAPBOOK

The Curious Career of Leo Brenner

THE NAME of Leo Brenner is seldom heard today except, perhaps, in connection with the large but inconspicuous lunar crater that his German selenographer friend Philipp Fauth (1867-1941) called after him. This present obscurity clashes sharply with the sudden fame that Brenner gained around 1895 as a gifted amateur observer of the moon and planets. But this international reputation soon began changing to notoriety, and eventually he made a dramatic end to his astronomical career.

This strange man and his actual accomplishments are hard to disentangle from the legends that he invented. Nearly everything that Brenner said or wrote about himself was intended to deceive. A fairly recent example of the resulting confusion may be found in H. P. Wilkins and P. Moore, *The Moon,* 1955. The six-line biographical sketch of Brenner on page 356 contains not a single correct statement except for his birth year (1855), his place of birth (Trieste, then in Austria), and that he built an observatory at Lussinpiccolo, where he and his wife observed the moon and planets.

"Leo Brenner" was one of the pseudonyms of a remarkable Balkan political adventurer, Spiridion Gopcevic, whose life has recently been carefully researched by the German historian Michael Heim. The biography by Heim and a judicious use of Brenner's own extensive astronomical writings make it possible to view Brenner's career more clearly, and to glimpse some of the demons that drove him.

MANORA OBSERVATORY

At the end of the last century, the Austrian flag flew over the chain of picturesque islands along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea. Lussinpiccolo, the main town on Lussin, one of the northern islands of the chain, was at that time a fashionable health resort. It was here that Gopcevic settled in October, 1893, prosperous because he had married a well-to-do wife a few years before and because he was receiving a political subsidy from the Austrian government. It was here that he adopted the name of Leo Brenner and with great enthusiasm took up astronomy as a new career.

He settled in a villa on 20 acres of gardens with a 15-year lease. Upon the roof of this house he erected his Manora Observatory, whose wooden dome contained an excellent 178-mm (7-inch) refracting telescope made by Reinfelder and Hertel. A filar micrometer, star spectroscope, camera, and other accessories were purchased, together with the beginnings of an astronomical library that eventually contained over 4,000 volumes. Regular observing with the 7-inch began on May 9, 1894. From the start, Brenner devoted himself primarily to the study of the moon, Venus, Mars, and Jupiter.

Lussinpiccolo was evidently a very favorable site for astronomical work. Brenner extolled its mild climate, clear dust-free air, and steady seeing. This last he associated with the small day-to-night temperature variation.

Brenner spared no pains to publicize Manora Observatory and its work. For example, prominent amateurs and professional astronomers were often invited to visit. He began to publish many observational articles, at first chiefly on Mars and Jupiter, in such periodicals as *Astronomische Nachrichten, Observatory,* the *Journal* of the British Astronomical Association, and the *English Mechanic and World of Science.*

The good initial impression that Brenner made on his contemporaries is not hard to understand. In 1895, the systematic study of planetary surfaces was confined to a few workers and was still mainly descriptive, limited to visual inspection and drawing. The shining examples of G. V. Schiaparelli and Percival Lowell offered exciting prospects of discovery by a sharp-eyed observer working at a first-rate site.

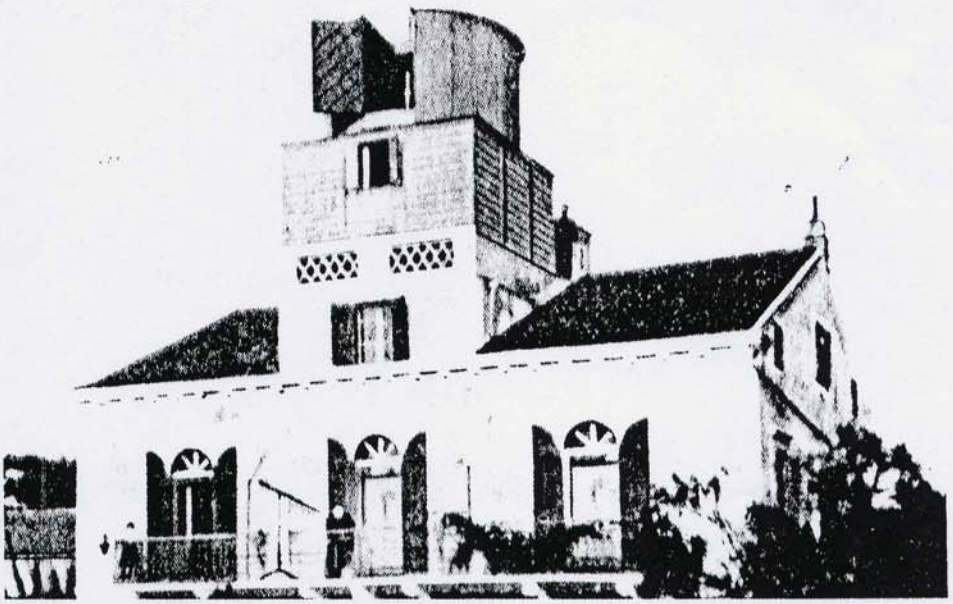
But the findings that Brenner so confidently announced became more and more extreme. From his numerous drawings of dusky markings on Venus, he proclaimed in 1895 that the rotation period of that planet was 23 hours 57 minutes 36.2396 seconds. In the following year he revised the seconds to 36.3773. Also in 1896, he triumphantly announced the rotation periods of Mercury and Uranus to be 33¼ hours and 8 hours 17 minutes. It is unnecessary to comment that these numbers are unrelated to the currently accepted values.

Likewise remarkable was Brenner's map of Mars from his observations in 1896-97, showing no fewer than 164 canals, most of them new. Fully 18 of them radiated in various directions from one dark spot, Trivium Charontis. Brenner was later to claim that he had detected 34 Martian canals using only a 3-inch refractor.

There was also the matter of the companion of Sirius, which had passed through the periastron point of its orbit in 1894. Between March, 1891, when S. W. Burnham last measured it with the Lick 36-inch refractor, and August, 1896, when R. G. Aitken again saw it with the same telescope, the faint companion was lost in the glare of its brilliant primary. Nevertheless, Brenner published in the *Astronomische Nachrichten* what purported to be micrometer measurements of Sirius B with his 7-inch on two nights in March, 1897.

The kindest interpretation of these varied marvelous observations by Brenner is that he could not distinguish between what he imagined and what he saw. The astronomers whose plaudits Brenner sought turned away from him, and Heinrich Kreutz, editor of the *Astronomische Nachrichten,* finally declined to print any more of his contributions.

Brenner aggravated his worsening relations with the astronomical world by vicious abuse of anyone who disagreed with him. For example, Percival Lowell in early 1896 had visited Lussinpiccolo and carried out



Manora Observatory, where Leo Brenner and his wife observed from 1895 to 1909. In his astronomical writings he always referred to her by the pseudonym of Frau Manora. From M. Heim, *Spiridion Gopcevic.*

Venus observations with him. Lowell, however, did not subscribe to Brenner's 24-hour rotation period, and therefore came under heavy attack for both his Venus and Mars work.

Another vendetta was conducted against E. M. Antoniadi and Camille Flammarion at Juvisy Observatory in France, who had the temerity to differ with some of Brenner's 1896-97 Mars work. Antoniadi was from 1896 to 1917 the director of the British Astronomical Association's Mars section, and the wanton alienation of this influential figure must have damaged Brenner's repute in French and British amateur circles. A third target of Brenner's scurrilous attacks was the Vienna Observatory. How they began I do not know, but for years he libeled its equipment and staff.

Because he was no longer a welcome contributor to scientific journals, Brenner in 1899 started his own monthly magazine, *Astronomische Rundschau* (Astronomical Review). It was, however, much more than a place to publish his own observations. Each issue contained information about new astronomical developments, culled from the professional literature. There were articles by well-known astronomical figures including Fauth, T. J. J. See, E. E. Barnard, and Simon Newcomb, but I suspect that often these features were copied rather than contributed.

One *Rundschau* article of lasting value is that by Fauth (*3*, 172, 1901) on the lunar formation Linné. It demolishes conclusively the old misunderstanding that Linné had changed physically from a crater to a bright spot sometime around the middle of the 19th century.

Each issue had an extensive section of printed replies to Brenner's correspondents. Some were routine, as when R. F. in Vienna was told of a book where he could read how to determine the height of a lunar mountain from a measurement of its shadow length. But others are clearly fakes, inserted to further Brenner's personal enmities. For example, the distinguished Hungarian astrophysicist N. von Konkoly-Thege was treated as follows.

In Vol. *1*, No. 7, of the *Rundschau*, correspondent H. N. in Vienna was informed: "The judge Konkoly-Thege in Komarom who was suspended for scandalous misuse of office is named Ludwig, and hence is not the same person as the scientist, who is named Nikolaus. However, they are brothers."

The next issue added two more insults. A reply to H. N. said: "Dr. N. von Konkoly assures us that the judge in question is not his brother, although a relation." The other reply, addressed to Dr. N. v. K. himself, read: "Until the judicial inquiry is complete and the verdict published, we will not comment on the degree of guilt. The error arose from your own words. We are delighted that the *Astronomische Rundschau* has come to your attention and meets with your approval."

Leo Brenner (Spiridion Gopcevic), from a photograph taken about 1890.

The *Rundschau* continued to appear until March, 1909. But Brenner's interest in astronomy had evidently been waning for a long time, as his observing became less and less frequent. There appear to have been money problems, too. He states that financial aid from the Austrian government ceased. The contents of Manora Observatory were sold. In the final issue of the *Rundschau*, Brenner dramatically announced that he was really Count Spiridion Gopcevic, with achievements that included command of 30 languages. Because of the shameful way that the government and scientific cliques had treated him, he said, he was going to disappear from the world of astronomy, and he did.

SOME OTHER LIVES

According to Heim's inquiries, Gopcevic was not of noble lineage, despite his claims to be a count and to be a descendant of the early kings of Serbia. His father, also named Spiridion, was a wealthy shipowner and merchant of Trieste, who was bankrupted by the Crimean War and committed suicide in 1861, when his son was six. The widow took young Spiridion and his sister to Vienna for their education but died soon after.

The picture that emerges of Gopcevic as he grew into manhood is a highly intelligent school dropout, embittered by the decline in his family fortunes and ambitious to win distinction. An opportunity came in 1875, when political tensions in the Balkans came to a head and war broke out between Montenegro and Turkey. Gopcevic went to Montenegro to seek command of a military unit, on the strength of a fancied relationship with the ruler, Prince Nikola. But the prince paid little attention to the 20-year-old Austrian, who returned disappointed to Vienna, where he wrote a book about the war. In this he gave the impression that he had actually served in the field. The book became a best seller, and Gopcevic was fairly launched as a journalist. During the next decade he was a voluminous author of polemical articles and books on Balkan politics. This is not the place to detail how he actively championed and abandoned in turn such causes as Serbian nationalism, Albanian independence, a South Slav state, and the integrity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These frequent changes of allegiance seem related to his tendency to alienate his backers.

At one time about 1890 he was publishing an antisemitic newspaper in Vienna. He became a military commentator, writing knowingly about strategy, torpedoes, and fortifications. He was also the author of a travel book or two, and some now-forgotten novels.

Undoubtedly Gopcevic was a man with great mental curiosity and powers of comprehension, combined with an intense if somewhat unsystematic capacity for work. Yet, as Heim remarks, his was an uncreative and rather shallow mind, and his personality prevented cooperation with others. Eventually he must have realized that authorship did not give the satisfaction he was searching for. Thus he decided to become an astronomer, and took the new identity of Leo Brenner, as told above.

After Manora Observatory was sold in 1909, Gopcevic went to America and lived obscurely in San Francisco for several years. According to Heim, he composed two operas here in 1912, *The Paris September Days* and *The Life Saver.*

Returning to Austria, he worked as a propagandist during World War I in a fruitless effort to convince Serbia to change sides and become an ally of Austria against Russia. After the Austrian collapse, he eked out a living in Berlin by writing. He was in such poverty that (if tradition be believed) he obtained electricity for his lodgings by bypassing the meter. Gopcevic had dropped so far out of public sight that even the year of his death is not known, various sources citing anything from 1909 to 1936.

The last known publication by this complex and tragic figure was a 1922 article about Atlantis and Lemuria. Heim aptly remarks that the search for sunken lands is symbolic of Gopcevic's restless life.

JOSEPH ASHBROOK

NOTES

Michael Heim's book is *Spiridion Gopcevic: Leben und Werk*, Wiesbaden, 1966. There is a complete set of *Astronomische Rundschau* at Harvard Observatory. This article could not have been written without the generous help of Jürgen Blunck, H. von Socher, Richard Baum, and Mrs. Estelle Karlin.