

STRASBOURG OBSERVATORY AND ASTRONOMICAL EVENTS IN THE REGIONAL PRESS IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract. This chapter illustrates rare appearances in the regional press of Strasbourg Observatory around the beginning of the 20th century. The particular cases discussed are the Observatory inauguration in 1881, a fireball triggering some 150 letters addressed to the Observatory in 1904, and bright comets around 1910.

1. Introduction

The discovery in Strasbourg Observatory archives of a voluminous file dealing with a bright meteor in the Alsatian sky on 21 March 1904 led us to look for mentions of the event in the local press and more particularly in the *Straßburger Neueste Nachrichten (SNN)* [Strasbourg Latest News] that became subsequently in French the *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace (DNA)* [Latest News from Alsace]¹.

¹ Alsace is the smallest region of France made of two Départements (Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin) hosting a population of about 1,750,000 inhabitants over 8280 square kilometers (Year 2000 numbers), but the *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace (DNA)* is one of the most important regional daily newspapers in France (more than 200,000 copies) with 26 local editions including one largely in German.

Starting from that celestial phenomenon that struck people's minds, we attempted to find traces of other astronomical events such as the appearances of bright comets at the beginning of the 20th century or, a bit earlier, the inauguration of the Imperial Observatory in 1881.

2. The 1904 Meteor File

The stack of old yellowed letters is really impressive. Most of them were in German Gothic handwriting [Kurrentschrift] and addressed to the then Director of the Imperial Observatory Ernest Becker (1843-1912) and/or to his Assistant Karl Schiller (1882-1979). The file, held for a century in the Observatory archives, survived the conflicts that rocked the area subsequently. Its 150 pieces are dealing with a bright meteor, very likely a fireball, over the Rhine valley on 21 March 1904.

What triggered such a massive correspondence? Was the reputation of the place so big, while it had been inaugurated only some twenty years earlier? The considerable quantity of documents was certainly the result, at least partially, of a call published by the Observatory in the SNN on 24 March (Fig. 1), three days after the event that took place on 21 March around 20:30. The Observatory invited witnesses of the phenomenon to communicate details such as the exact time, the direction, the course in the sky, the appearance, and so on. The same call appeared also the same day in another daily newspaper of the city, the *Straßburger Post* (Fig. 2). We suspect, from the contents of the letters, that it was also echoed in other regional newspapers, possibly via press agencies.

A first mention of the fireball was however printed already on 22 March in the SNN: a few lines speaking of a “*a big blue ball, leaving behind a wavy trail.*” No report of the phenomenon appeared in the issue dated 23 March, but, the following day, two small notes related observations made at Pisdorf and at Zeinheim, two villages near Saverne, some 40km Northwest of Strasbourg. The meteor was again mentioned a last time on 28 March and then disappeared from the newspaper.

Those few, rather brief, references in the press are in contrast with the numerous letters sent to the Observatory between 24 March and 4 April 1904. Two features from these are striking. First, precise observations with numerous details were frequently accompanied by sketches or carefully drawn illustrations. About a century ago (no television!), people were probably paying more attention to celestial phenomena which were better watched than today. The light pollution over our cities nowadays and the everyday flood of images are certainly playing some rôle in this.

Samples of letters are illustrated in Figs. 3 to 6. They show the variety of input (mostly in German, but also a few in French) from shop owners,

The image shows a single page from an old German newspaper. The layout includes a large masthead at the top, followed by several columns of text. The most prominent features are the large, bold, decorative headings:

- Strassburger Nachrichten.** (Large, bold, at the top left)
- 27. Jahrgang** (Large, bold, at the top center)
- Die heutige Nummer enthält 16 Seiten.** (Large, bold, at the top right)
- Nr. 71. Zweites Blatt.** (Large, bold, at the bottom left)

The main body of the page contains dense columns of text in a smaller font, divided into sections by horizontal lines. There are also some smaller, italicized headings and labels throughout the page.



Figure 2. The call as published in another city newspaper, the *Straßburger Post* on 24 March 1904.

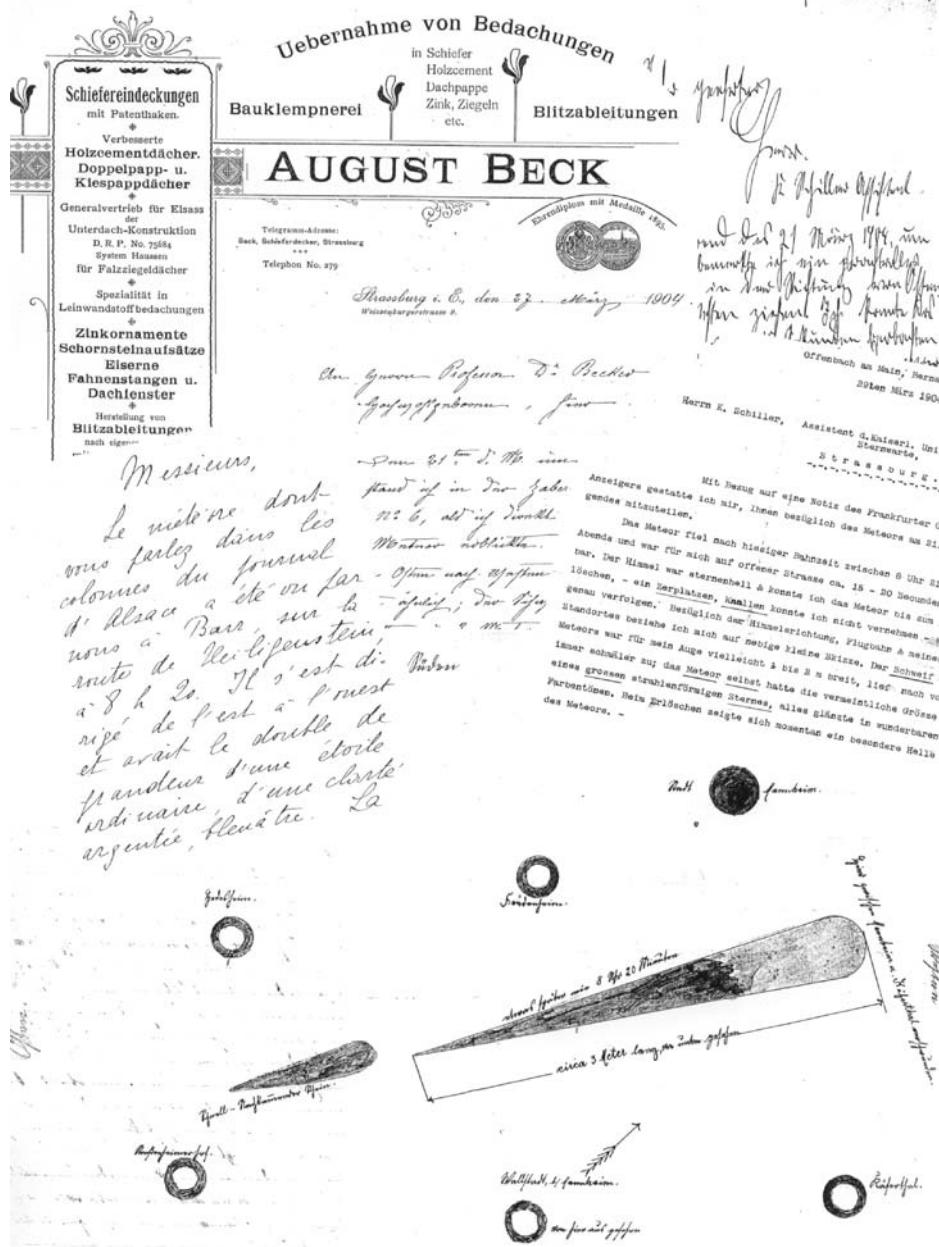


Figure 3. Examples of letters received at Strasbourg Observatory about the 1904 fireball. Note they address either Becker (Director) or Schiller (Assistant). The letter on the middle left is in French.

Ums
an die Direction der Sternwarte
Strassburg.

Bejahr angefangen 26/3/04

Fritz UMBEHR
ARCHITEKT U. BAUINGENIEUR

NEUNKIRCHEN 26. MÄRZ 1904.
(D. Fr.)

An die Direction der Sternwarte
Strassburg.

Die hiesige Saar- & Blieszeitung fordert auf, Beobachtungen über das Meteor am verflossenen Montag Abend zu Ihrer Kenntnis zu bringen. Ich komme diesem Wunsche hiermit nach.

Ich stand am Montag Abend nach 8 Uhr auf der von er nach Saarbrücken führenden Strasse am Stumm'schen Kreis, wo den gerade in Ausführung begriffenen Bauwerken an einem der Hochofenapparate zuzusehen. Genau 20 Minuten nach der Werksuhr, sahe ich im Südosten ein Aufleuchten, daß sich in der ersten Sekunde Sternschnuppenfall ansah, und zwar schien die Richtung senkrecht zu sein, um aber bald in entale Richtung überzugehen. Das Licht verging schnell, war weißleuchtend und zog eine

Denk., Schule für Malerei Nr. 6,
Dresden 143 (Nr. 3²) Amberg 36
der Verein für Kunst

Sketch of the fire's path from Saarbrücken to Strassburg.

Diagram showing the trajectory of the meteor shower.

Labels in the diagram:
Luftraum (Airspace)
Raum (Space)
X man standpunkt vom Feuermen 8¹⁵

Figure 4. More examples of letters on the 1904 fireball. Nowadays only few people can decipher handwritten German Gothic such as in the top left letter. The typewriter used for the top right letter was missing the eszet (ß replaced by ss – see Footnote 2).

8. Gendarmerie-Brigade
Saarbrücker Offizier-Distrikt
Ottweiler Beritt.

Kammergericht S. Trier, den 25. März 1907



B. Klärung
s. Geeren
b. Handwerken & Co.
s. Villenreeder
d. Körnerberg
s. Frühe Römer
f. Blaumühle, sogenannte
g. Fazifizierung, Doppel-
h. Göttingen und Lüneburg

Sonntag Abend um den 8.30 Uhr.
Zu einer Sparsamkeit eingeladen
mit Aufzehrung und Feierabend
am 2. März abends zwölf Uhr
wurde ich auf der Rückfahrt
aus Sparta in Lübeck wieder
gepfarrt habe. Das Wetter
ist hier einiges besseres
Rück, welche vor
liegt eine Gitarre war
zog sich ein lang
woben über jede St
fehlkommende Stelle
wurde bald wieder auf
Reisen gezogen, so
dass man auf der
Inseln wieder

A black and white sketch of a house on stilts over water. The house has a gabled roof with a chimney emitting smoke. It features several windows and a central entrance. The house sits on four stilts. In the foreground, there is a simple tree with sparse branches. The background shows a distant shoreline with some foliage. Below the sketch, the text "For Minnow Slampyfule" is written in a cursive script.

Figure 5. More examples of letters on the 1904 fireball. The top left letter, structured as a real police report, came indeed from a state police post.

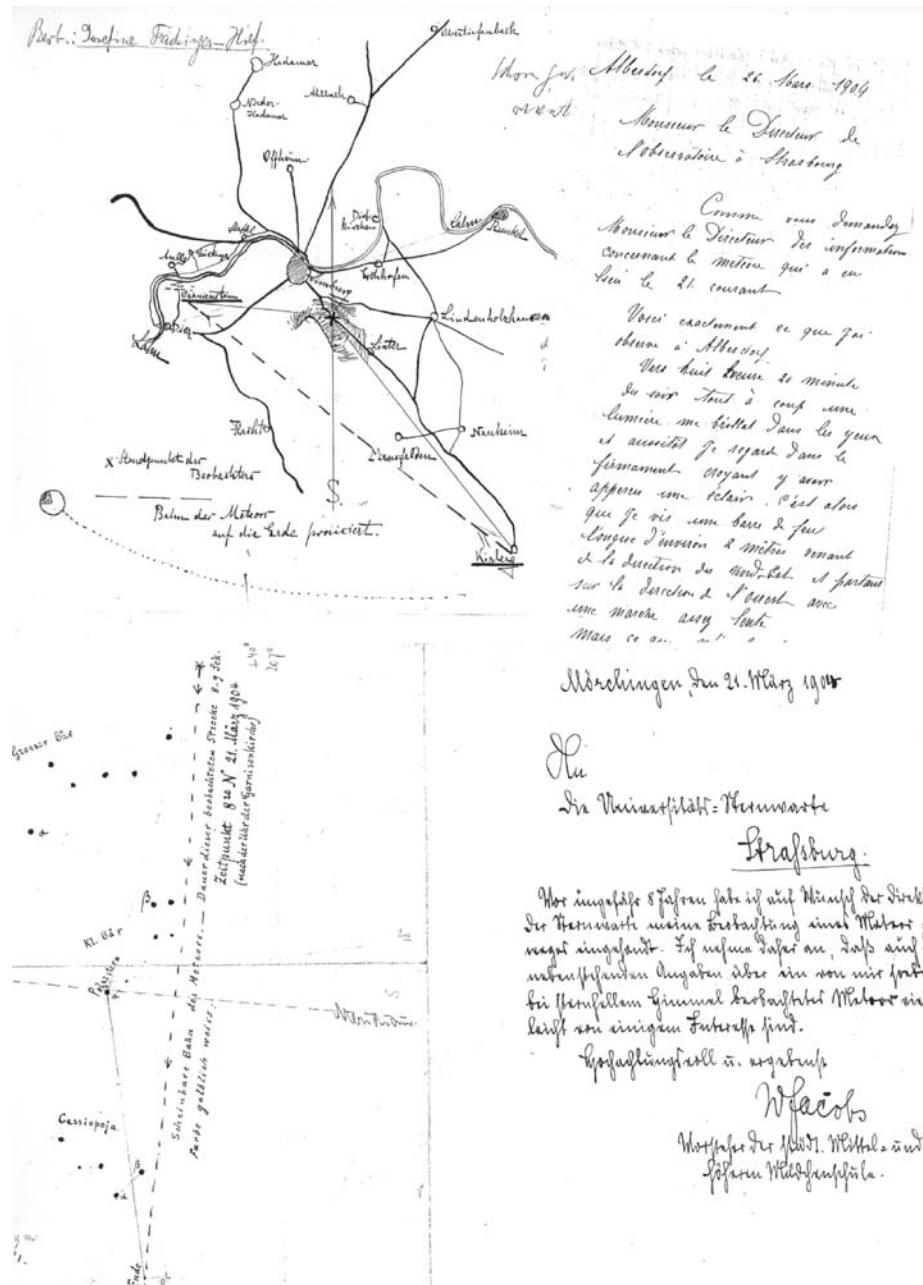


Figure 6. More examples of letters on the 1904 fireball. Admire the top left drawing. The top right letter is in French.

police officers, parish priests, commoners and peasants. Note the typed letters² at a time when etiquette required people to write letters with the neatest hand and liquid ink.

Fig. 7 reproduces over two pages an especially interesting communication sent by a locomotive stoker on a large sheet of drawing paper³.

The second surprise came from the extent of the area from which originated the letters: from Strasbourg and the Alsatian countryside of course, but also from Lorraine, from the Palatinate and the Saar, from Luxembourg and Mainz, and so on. Why did those senders address their observations to Strasbourg rather than to Heidelberg or Berlin? The attraction of Strasbourg, the ‘new’, attractive and bursting city of the time was perhaps part of the explanation, as well as possible additional appearances of the Observatory call, echoed in other newspapers thanks to press agencies.

Apparently the Observatory never published in the newspapers a synthesis of all the mail received and we failed to find anything in the Observatory annual reports and in the *Annalen*. But an interesting series of short notes appeared in the *Astronomische Nachrichten*.

H. Rosenberg (1905a) first described a method for determining the trajectory of meteors and subsequently applied it to the 21 March 1904 one (Rosenberg 1905b). This triggered some comments from P. Moschick (1905) of Heidelberg Observatory, answered in turn by Rosenberg (1905c).

According to Rosenberg (1905b), the meteor lit up around Weil-der-Stadt (Kepler’s birthplace) near Stuttgart at about 57km of altitude. The

²Typewriters were then in infancy. Remington started producing their first typewriter on 1 March 1873 in Ilion, NY. Another early typewriter manufacturer was Underwood. One could guess the typewriters used here had been imported from the US since the typical German character ß was missing and had to be typed as ss.

³The framed text appearing on the right-hand side of Fig. 7 can be translated as follows:

“Right Honorable Sir,

Hereby I am sending you a sketch of the trajectory and of the observation of the meteor that I happened to be able to observe by chance. As I guessed that a call would appear in the newspaper, I took note precisely of everything. Perhaps you will be able to use my data.

From the train station clock, it was 8:25 [pm] when the meteor showed up, from *a-b* on the drawing, illuminating with full light, brighter than the moonshine. It was a white light mixed with blue rays. In *b*, it went out and splitted up until *e* into red-glowing pieces that scattered in all directions. I perceived also a slight hissing and a noise of crackling. The whole event lasted 22-25 seconds. My position of observation was the road to Mittelhausbergen in Cronenbourg.

With respectful greetings from

Franz Brockow

Qualified (Locomotive) Stoker.”

This text was deciphered from German Gothic and translated into French by Louis Ludes who discovered in the process he was currently living in a house next to the one occupied then by the Brockow family!

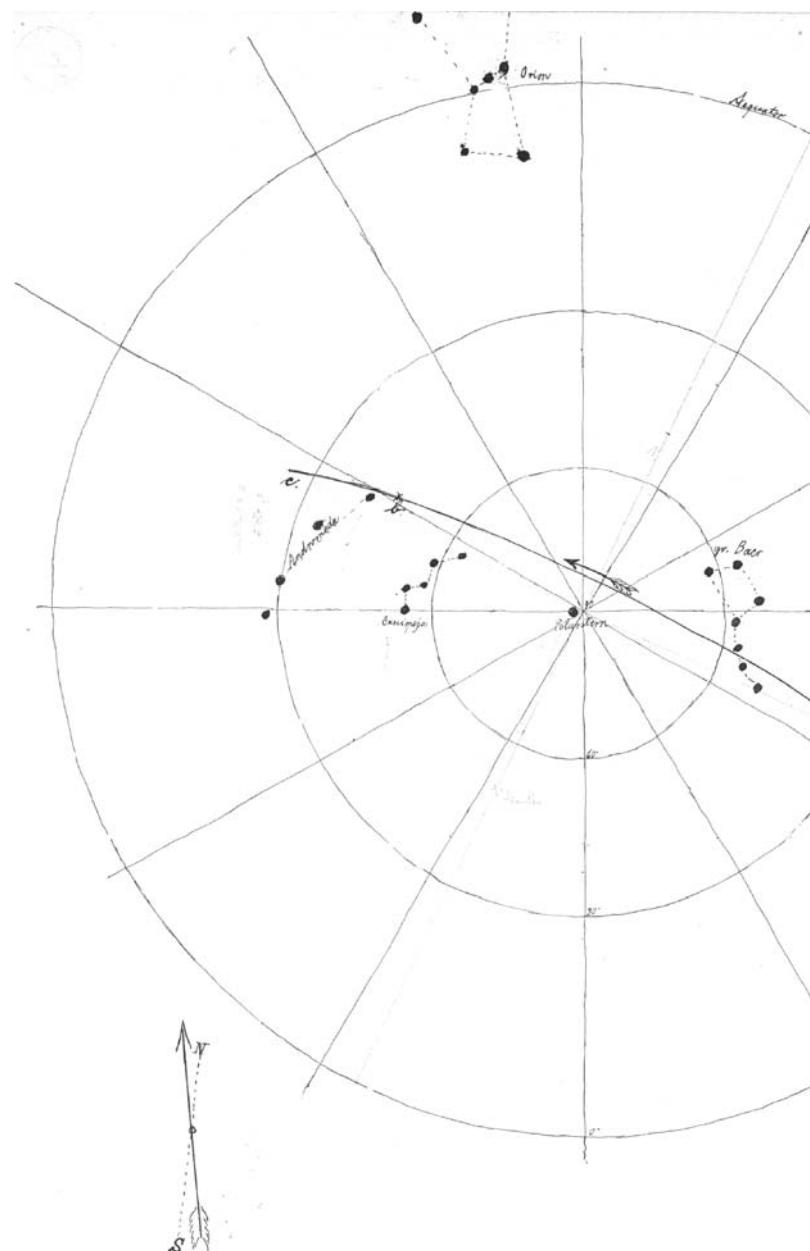
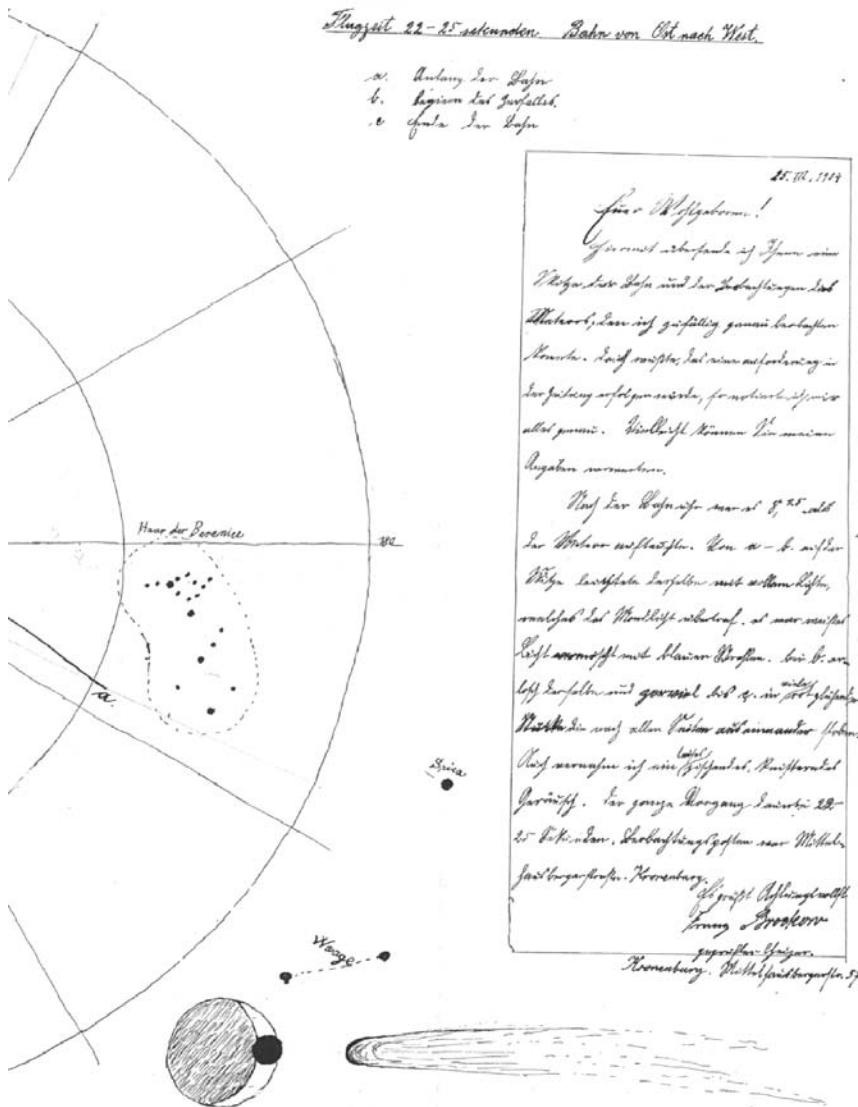


Figure 7. An especially interesting and detailed drawing received from a locomotive stoker called Franz Brockow living near Strasbourg. See Footnote 3 for a translation of the framed text appearing on the right-hand page as well as for an interesting anecdote.

Bahn des Meteor vom 21. III. 1904, abends 8,25.

Flugzeit 22-25 sekunden. Bahn von Ost nach West.

- a. Anthony Ivar Lofgren
 - b. Legion has been settled.
 - c. Santa Ivar Lofgren



Größenverhältnis des Meteor zur Mondschwebe des gleichen Tages.

object was moving roughly Westwards at an average speed of about 41km/h until splitting up some 20' North of Rheims (the crowning city of French Kings) at a final altitude of about 126km. This would mean that the meteorite was not falling towards the ground, but in fact going up, after apparently rebounding on the densest atmospheric layers in a ricochet effect.

Moschick offered different values obtained with a different method and argued about the influence of uncertainties. But he basically confirmed the ascending movement.

Amazingly enough, at the time of concluding this chapter, a fireball appeared in the Alsatian sky, following a ground trajectory similar to the 1904 one, but this time with a usual descending movement, triggering hundreds of testimonies – both spontaneous and answering calls from local associations and planetariums (Bodenmuller 2005). On 18 February 2005 towards 22:30, the meteorite was seen as coming from Germany, crossing Westwards the Alsatian plain at an altitude of about 50km, passing a few kilometers North of Vittel and likely hitting the ground around the border between the *départements* of Vosges and Haute-Marne where the impact is currently being searched.

3. Other Astronomy-Related Events

From the wealth of observations of the March 1904 fireball and the vast area covered by the letters, we wondered whether there would be more mentions, in the SNN, of the Observatory activities or of other astronomical events.

Since it would take ages to flip through all pages of the tens of volumes in the newspaper archives⁴, we chose to tackle first a few specific slots such as the Observatory inauguration in September 1881 and the appearance of bright comets: Comet Morehouse (1908c/1908 III) in October/November 1908, the “Great Comet” (1910a/1910 I) of January 1910⁵, Halley’s Comet in May 1910 and Comet Brooks (1911c/1911 V) in October/November 1911.

3.1. THE OBSERVATORY INAUGURATION

The edification of Strasbourg Imperial Observatory was initiated in 1877, leading to an official inauguration by a General Assembly of the *Astronomische Gesellschaft (AG)* from 22 to 24 September 1881.

“It was then the largest and the most modern observatory in Europe”, say the DNA on 17 May 1947 in a long article devoted to the difficulties of the Observatory after World War II. As recalled elsewhere in this volume

⁴ All issues have been microfilmed since the newspaper foundation in 1877.

⁵ Also called Johannesburg Comet as it had been discovered in South Africa.



Figure 8. The seven lines reporting the General Assembly of the *Astronomische Gesellschaft* inaugurating Strasbourg Imperial Observatory in the *Straßburger Neueste Nachrichten* (SNN) on 25 September 1881. Note the mention of the socio-cultural event, attending the *Nozze di Figaro* [Figaro's Hochzeit] and the subheader in French. (© DNA)

(Seggewiss 2005), the AG held another General Assembly at the Observatory in 1982 to celebrate its centenary, an event that was also reported in the DNA (21 & 22 February 1982).

Well, in 1881, the inauguration of the largest and most modern European observatory went almost unnoticed, at least in the SNN. Seven modest lines on the first page of the 25 September issue (Fig. 8) informed that the yearly assembly of the *Astronomische Gesellschaft* was held at the new observatory “*with a large number of participants, many of which came from abroad*” and that these attended in the evening a performance: Mozart’s *Nozze di Figaro*.

Meanwhile, the newspapers from 20 to 27 September 1881 reported at length on an agricultural exhibition in Strasbourg, on the Kaiser’s visit in Karlsruhe where he was attending a princely wedding, as well as on the re-opening of the schools taking place that Monday 26 September 1881!

3.2. COMETS

Jumping a quarter of century ahead in time, to Fall 1908, four years and half after the 1904 fireball, we would expect the region was enjoying the celestial display of Comet Morehouse (1908c/1908 III). Camille Flammarion’s *Astronomie Populaire* re-edited in 1955 by André Danjon⁶ displays magnificent pictures of that comet taken in October 1908 at Meudon Observatory.

From 14 to 26 October 1908, there was no mention of that hairy object in the SNN, but we learn that five professors of Strasbourg University had been invited to attend Prince August Wilhelm’s wedding in Berlin, that dramatic rescue operations took place at a race of montgolfiers, and that the Zeppelin airship had carried out two splendid flights.

Also the seismic station⁷, located at a stone throw from the Observatory, is frequently mentioned as it recorded earthquakes in Turkmenistan, some 6,000 km away from Strasbourg, on 14 and 16 October 1908. A week later, another quake struck Plauen’s area in Southwest Saxony.

The situation changed fifteen months later with the unexpected arrival of a new bright comet (Great January Comet 1910a/1910 I) while people were already preparing themselves for the return of Halley’s Comet, predicted for April/May 1910. In their issue of 29 January 1910, the SNN devoted a long article to the history of comets, reminding that the last bright comet was visible in 1882. On 1 February 1910, the newspaper mentioned

⁶Danjon was then Director of Paris Observatory after having been in charge of Strasbourg Observatory from 1929 to 1945.

⁷See Duerbeck’s (2005) contribution to this volume for a section on the beginnings of seismology in Strasbourg under the leadership of Ernst von Rebeur-Paschwitz (1861–1895).



Figure 9. Top part of one of the articles on comets run by the *SNN* around Halley's Comet return in 1910, here in the issue of 18 May 1910. (© DNA)

observations carried out at the *Kehltor* [gate to Kehl, the city across the Rhine], at Pisdorf near Saverne⁸, in Sarralbe, as well as at the Archenhold Observatory in Berlin-Treptow.

Strasbourg Observatory was mentioned nowhere, neither with comet observations, nor with explanations. A similar situation occurred around mid-May 1910 when the comet fever triggered by Halley's Comet return reached its climax: not a single day between 17 and 27 May passed without a paper on Halley's Comet or on the passage of the Earth through its tail, something anxiously expected; observations were reported from Heidelberg, Potsdam and Vienna; but no word was given from Strasbourg Observatory where the Director was now Julius Bauschinger (1860-1934), having taken over from Becker in 1909.

On 21 and 23 May 1910, an article's author regretted that the comet – perhaps hidden by the haze above the horizon – was still invisible from Strasbourg. Finally, on 24 May, it was visible, but the observer was rather disappointed and, on 27 May, the tail was reported as still not visible from Mulhouse nor Strasbourg, in spite of the usage of instruments. As to the astronomers from the Imperial Observatory, they seemed to be ... eclipsed too from the press. On the contrary, the seismic station was present again in the news with a remote earthquake in the Aleutian Islands and, on 27 May 1910, a much closer quake shaking the Sundgau (Southern Alsace).

After such a disappointing performance from Halley's Comet (actually much alike the 1985-86 return), what could be expected of the nevertheless beautiful Comet Brooks (1991c/1911 V) visiting us in October 1911? Between 28 October and 3 November 1911, the hairy object remained unreported in the newspaper that announced happily an aviation day in Strasbourg on 5 November with seven or eight montgolfiers ...

Strasbourg imperial astronomers were however not quite inactive as testified by the Observatory reports. Thus Director Becker (1909) mentioned 27 observations of Comet 1908c (Morehouse), probably carried out at the comet seeker illustrated in Fig. 10 reprinted from Krisch's (1901) *Lexikon*⁹. In the next report, the new Director Bauschinger (1910) mentioned modestly three observations of Comet 1909a, three more of 1909e and amazingly only four observations of Halley's Comet, but his following report (Bauschinger 1911) is much more generous with 35 observations of Halley's Comet, eight of Comet 1910a (Great Comet), ten of Comet 1910b and two of Comet 1910c. The subsequent annual reports are silent on comet observations.

⁸A century ago, a sky aficionado was definitely living in Pisdorf since observations of the 1904 fireball were already reported from that village (see above).

⁹See also Heck (2005) in this volume for a picture of the same instrument used in the 1920s by a French astronomer, possibly Rougier, on the Big Dome terrasse.

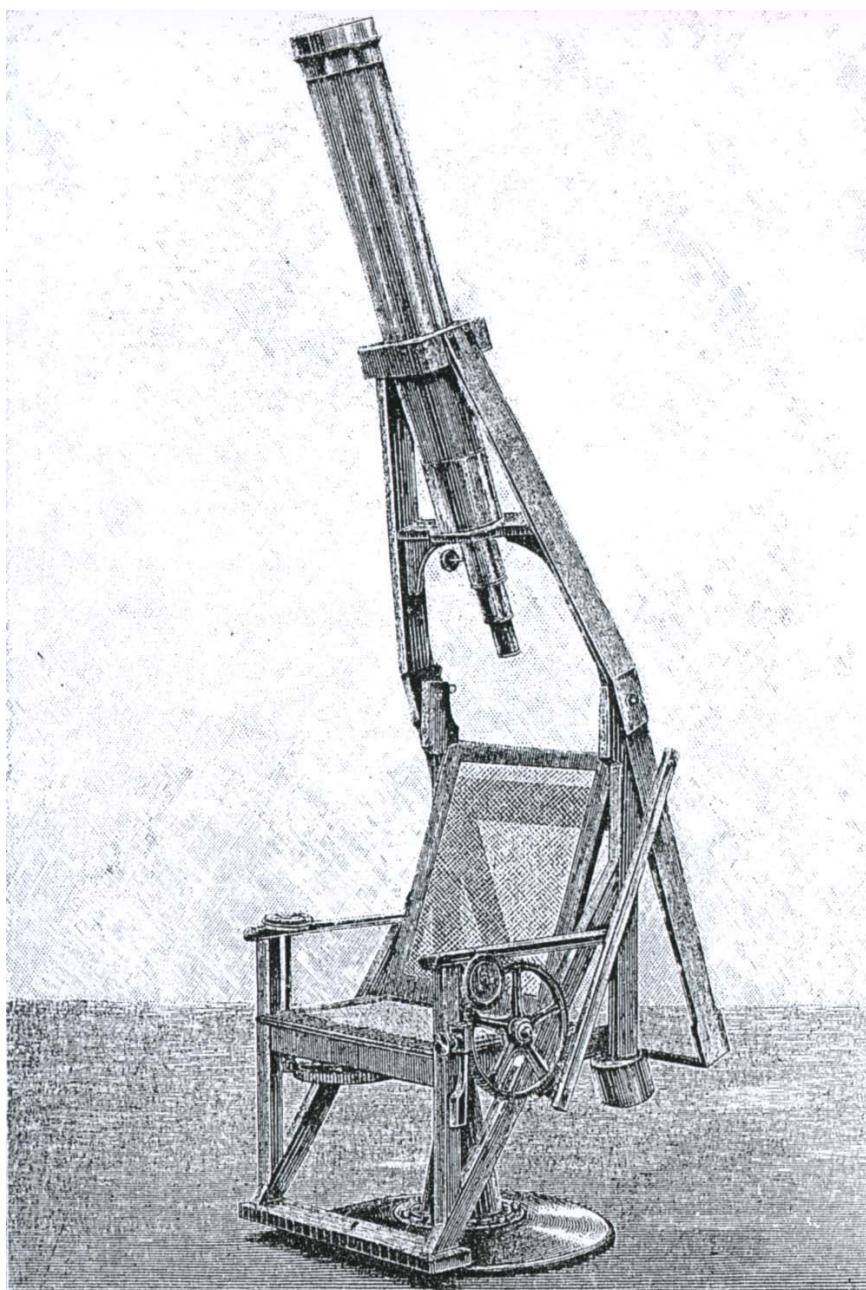


Figure 10. Strasbourg Observatory comet seeker as illustrated in Krisch's (1901) *Astronomisches Lexikon*. See also Footnote 9.

4. Last Comments

From the above examples, one cannot conclude that Strasbourg Observatory was totally absent from the media at the beginning of the 20th century, but its silence is somehow astonishing if compared to our current standards.

Acknowledgments

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