Mem. S.A.It. Vol. 82, 248

Memorie della

Some remarks on preparations for Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli's journey to Russia

V. K. Abalakin

Pulkovo Observatory, Saint-Petersburg, Russia, e-mail: victor.abalakin@gmail.com

Abstract. The present paper deals with the outline of some circumstances of the visit of Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli to the Nicolai Central Astronomical Observatory at Pulkovo, Russia. There are some scan-copies of official letters displayed which belong to the collection from the diplomatic correspondence between the Imperial Academy of Sciences of Russia, and the Diplomatic Service of the Kingdom of Sardinia. The correspondence had been triggered by the application of Schiaparelli for his trip to the Pulkovo Observatory with the aim of perfection in Astronomy and Geodesy. The corresponding facsimile as well as its English translation is given

1. Introduction

Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli (Fig. 1), the young Italian engineer who was strongly interested in Astronomy, after having spent two years at the Berliner Sternwarte with Professor Wilhelm Julius Foerster (outstanding German astronomer, assistent astronomer at the Observatory in Berlin since 1855, he directed it from 1865 to 1904) had expressed his desire to go to the Nicolai Central Astronomical Observatory at Pulkovo near Saint-Petersburg, Russia, for perfecting his astronomical and geodetical knowledges (fig. 2).

His personal petition had been given a proper consideration by Professor Francesco Carlini, director of the "Osservatorio di Brera "in 1832 – 1862, who supported Schiaparelli's application to the Royal Government of Sardinia for this trip.

In January 1859 Mr. Oldoini, the chargé d'affaires of the King of Sardinia, had sent via Count Dimitry Tolstoyi, a Russian statesman, the corresponding diplomatic note to the Ministry for the People's Education of the Russian Empire, containing the request to consider that petition. After some consultations by correspondence with Russian high-rank officials, and with Academician Otto Struve[1] vice-director of Pulkovo Observatory, as well, the visit of Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli to Pulkovo had been approved.

2. Preparation for Schiaparelli's journey to Russia

In the following the English translations of some relevant official letters (one original is given in Fig 3) are given for a better insight

[1] Otto von Struve (1819 – 1904) was the famous Russian astronomer, son of Wilhelm von Struve. In 1858 he had been appointed vice-director of Pulkovo Observatory, and in 1862 – 1889 he was the director of the Observatory. It was Otto v. Struve who, together with Giovanni Schiaparelli, had edited the observations of double stars made by Ercole Dembowski at Gallarate, and published by the Accademia dei Lincei in 1883 – 1884.

Fig. 1. Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli in 1880, painted by Maestro G. Landriani, at the request of Schiaparelli himself and Otto Struve. The portait hangs in the Round Hall of the Pulkovo Observatory along with many other outstanding astronomers.

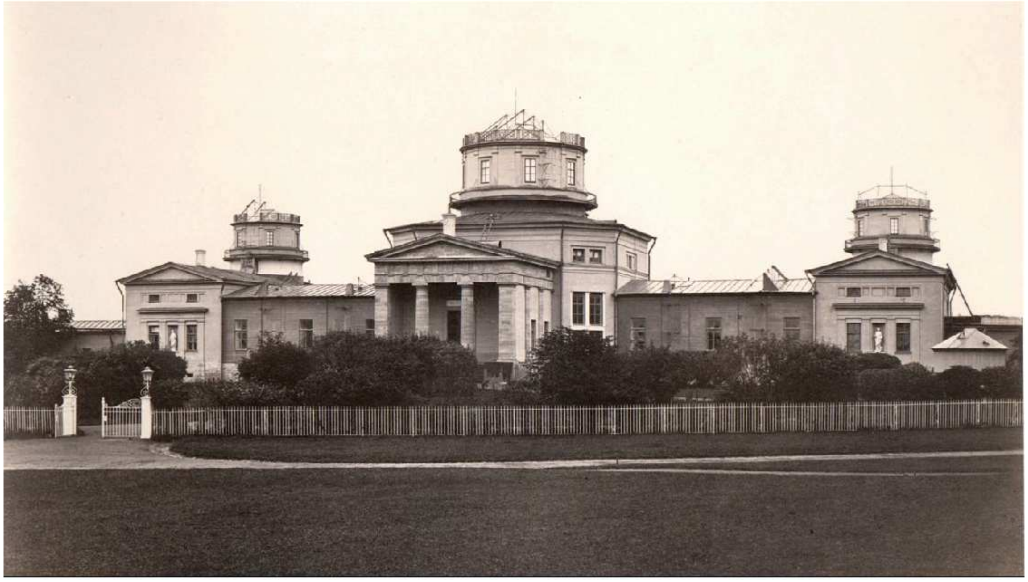

Fig. 2. The Pulkovo Observatory at the time of Schiaparelli's visit

into the circumstances of the preparation of Schiaparelli's visit to the Pulkovo Observatory, and the "mechanics" of the paper-work in the official Russia of that time, as well. As it is seen from the letter by Otto Struve, the very fact that some western scientists wished to visit the Pulkovo Observatory, having deserved by that time the fame of the "Astronomical Metropole of the World" as expressed by the American astronomer Benjamin Gould, had justified the endeavours of Academician Wilhelm Struve[2] directed towards the founding a new astronomical observatory which became the Nicolai Central Astronomical Observatory of Russia.

Otto Struve had written as follows: "*The desire of the Government of Sardinia to send the Piemont engineer Schiaparelli to the Nicolai Central Observatory for perfecting himself in the Practical Astronomy serves as a new evidence that our endeavours on the learned field have not been left without some recognition in foreign countries, too. This desire, therefore, may be accepted from our part with just the feeling of pleasure, and thus the Nicolai Central Observatory, relying upon the consent of His Excellency Mr. President of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, will not refuse, to be sure, to the young Sardinian scientist in assisting him, as far as it would depend on its own powers, in achievement of his goal through guidance in theoretical and practical studies of the subject, through provision for his participation in the Observatory's research work, and for all learned appliances, being at its disposal, and by assigning him the living quarters in the Observatory's building as well, the way it has already been done repeatably for other scientists, having been sent here by their governments.*"[3]

Strangely enough, no traces of records concerning the sojourn and work of Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli at the Pulkovo Observatory could be found among the archive documents in Saint-Petersburg.

[2] Friedrich Georg Wilhelm von Struve (1793 – 1864) was the famous Russian astronomer, who in 1839 had founded the Nicolai Central Astronomical Observatory in Pulkovo near Saint-Petersburg, Russia

[3] The documents are kept at the Saint-Petersburg branch of the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences, as Stock 2, Inventory 1 – 1859, No. 25.

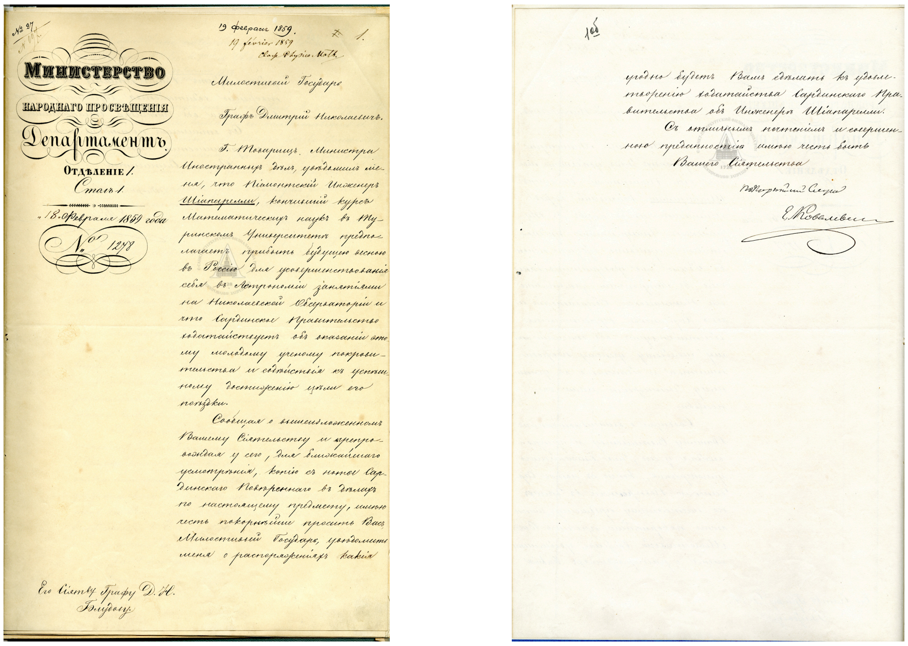

Fig. 3. Letter addressed by E. Kovalevsky to Count Dimitry Nykolayevich Bludov

As the Russian astronomer Vsevolod V. Stratonov[4] has recollected in his still unpublished manuscript “On waves of Life”, Giovanni Schiaparelli had lived in one of the Observatory’s guest rooms called the “cuckoos” situated directly under the western dome of the Observatory; here he had jockingly written with ink onto the wooden window-sill painted white an inscription in German, saying something like

“here dwelled a modest young man who has fought temptations of this world and not been recognized as a compatriot of Calliostro, otherwise he would . . . ”.

Since then this room had got the name “Schiaparelli’s room”, and the inscription had been preserved for several decades: even during the repeated time and again renewals it had never been painted over. Regretfully, Stratonov couldn’t decipher the inscription, faded and partly deteriorated by then, and later this interesting live evidence had gone by the total destruction of the Observatory in 1941, during the siege of Leningrad.

It is also in the book “Three Cities in Russia” written by Charles Piazzi Smyth, the Astronomer Royal for Scotland, that one finds, in Volume I, page 81, the description of the multinational “foreigner” community in the Pulkovo Observatory, and among it Giovanni Schiaparelli as “the young Sardinian savant . . . ” is mentioned.

[4] Vsevolod V. Stratonov (1869 – 1938) was a Russian astronomer who worked at the Pulkovo Observatory as a probationer in 1893 – 1894, having worked then in Tashkent and Moscow. In 1922, for his political views, Stratonov had been expelled among other Russian scientists by the Soviet government to Berlin, Germany, and in 1924 came to Prague, then Republic of Czecho-Slovakia.

Acknowledgements. It is my pleasant duty to express my cordial gratitude to people who have helped me compose this article, and among them, in the first line, to Dr. Irina V. Tunkina, director of the Saint-Petersburg branch of the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences, to Mrs. Nathalie S. Prokhorenko, Mrs. Elena N. Grouzdeva, and Mrs. Irina M. Shchedrova, collaborators of the Saint-Petersburg branch of the Archives of the Russian

Academy of Sciences, for their assistance in the search of the documentary historic sources, and to Dr. Vitaly B. Kaptsyug for his valuable advices.

Translation of the original letters

Letterhead:
MINISTRY
OF PEOPLE'S EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT
Section 1
Table 1.
1859 February 18
No. 1278

Gracious Monseigneur
Count Dimitry Nikolayevich.

Mr. Adjoint Minister of Foreign Affairs has given me the notice that an Engineer Schiaparelli, born in Piémont, who graduated from the University of Torino in Mathematical Sciences is contemplating to arrive on the coming Spring in Russia for perfecting himself in Astronomy through studies at the Nicolai Observatory, and that the Government of Sardinia is interceding for rendering this young scientist the protection and assistance to the successful achievement of the goal of his journey.

Informing Your Excellency about the above-stated and dispatching hereby a copy of the note of the Chargé d'Affaires of Sardinia on the present matter, I have the honour of submissively requesting you, Gracious Monseigneur, to let me know about the orders which you would like to make for satisfaction of the intercession of the Government of Sardinia for the Engineer Schiaparelli.

Respectfully yours,
E. Kovalevsky[5]
To His Excellency
Count D. N. Bludov[6]

[5] Eugraph P. Kovalevsky, Jr. (1795 – 1865) was the Russian statesman who in 1858 was appointed the Minister of the People's Education.

[6] Count Dimitrij N. Bludov (1785 – 1864) was the Russian statesman, and writer. In 1855 – 1864 Bludov was the President of the Imperial Academy of Sciences of Russia.

No. 2

Copie d'une note adressée à M^r le Sénateur de Tolstoy par M^r le M^{quis} d'Oldoini, en date de S^t Pétersbourg, le 24 Janvier/5 Février 1859.

Un jeune ingénieur Piémontais M^r Schiapparelli, qui a fait des études brillantes en mathématiques à l'Université de Turin, a été designé par le Gouvernement du Roi et pensionné, pour suivre les cours supérieurs d'astronomie et de géodesie à Berlin, ou il a trouvé toutes les facilités pour s'appliquer pendant ces deux dernières années aux sciences dans lequelles il promet de se distinguer. Son intention serait maintenant de venir ce printemps en Russie pour compléter ses études au célèbre et grandiose observatoire de Pulkowa près de S^t Pétersbourg, et d'après quelques demarches qu'il aurait faites en voie privée, M^r Schiapparelli a reçu l'assurance qu'il pourra y etre admis pendant quelque tems.

A cette occasion et par suite des ordres reçu de Turin je m'empresse de m'adresser à l'obligeance accoutumée de V. E. pour obtenir à ce jeune savant Piémontais un bienveillant accueil auprès des autorités Russes et particulièrement auprès des hommes, à juste titre célèbres, placés à la direction de l'Observatoire précité.

Les faveurs accordées en tout tems par le Gouvernement Impérial aux savants étrangers venus dans l'Empire pour s'occuper des sciences, me font espèrer qu'Il voudra bien accueillir favorablement la recommandation que je suis chargé de Lui adresser de la part du Gouvernement du Roi, et que M^r Schiapparelli obtiendra par l'entremise de V. E. la protection et l'appui qu'il désire en cette circonstance.
J'ai l'honneur, etc.
Pour copie conforme :
Le Chef du Section B. Posnansky