Two Turkish Lady Astronomers

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In 1938, I attended a meeting of the International Astronomical Union in Sweden. A German astronomer, Erwin Finlay Freundlich, who fled the Nazis and became a Professor of Astronomy in Istanbul, Turkey, introduced himself and told me that the most gifted of all the students he had ever had was a girl who had just earned her Doctorate under his direction. She would soon be going to Harvard as an Assistant Astronomer for a year. As she had never been away from home, Freundlich asked me to look after her when she would first arrive at Harvard. That lady, Dr. Paris Pişmiş (1911–1999), and I soon became close friends.

With the outbreak of World War II it did not seem advisable for Pişmiş to return to Turkey, and she remained in the States three and a half years. Meanwhile a mathematician from Mexico, Felix Recillas, visited Harvard. Eventually he and Pişmiş married and settled in Mexico. In 1998 she published her autobiography, *Reminiscences in the Life of Paris Pişmiş: a Woman Astronomer* (Pişmiş 1999). The Preface to Pişmiş's book was written by Arcadio Poveda, a student under Pişmiş, who earned his Ph.D. in Astronomy at the University of California in 1951. He summarized the treatise by stating that her contributions to the development of astronomy in Mexico made it better known to the world.

Paris Pişmiş was an exceptionally brilliant scholar. During her lifetime she visited over 20 nations, giving astronomical lectures in any of six languages: Turkish, English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish. In Mexico she supervised at least half a dozen Ph.D. theses by graduate students at UNAM (the National Autonomous University of Mexico). She is the one person most influential in establishing Mexico's importance in astronomical education and research. Moreover, she was a role model for women astronomers. Of approximately 80 astronomers at UNAM over the years, 25% were women (Torres-Peimbert 1999).

Janet Hanula Akyüz (January 2, 1943–March 22, 2004), another Turkish girl, had graduated in 1965 from Brandeis University and continued her graduate studies at the University of Virginia. Back home in Turkey in 1969, she contacted Paris Pişmiş (who was also visiting her old Turkish home) to ask if Pişmiş knew of any observatory in the United States where she, Janet, might apply for a summer job. Pişmiş promptly replied, "I have a friend..." and outlined my Maria Mitchell Observatory summer program for young women astronomy students. Although I had already filled my usual quota of four, I gladly responded favorably to Janet's application.

Janet Akyüz Mattei with the author and Paris Pişmiş (top to bottom), Mexico City, 1993. *(AAVSO Archives, Janet Mattei Collection)*

That year I had already invited the AAVSO to hold its annual meeting in Nantucket when I found that earlier the same week I was obliged, in connection with my winter's work at Yale, to attend an astrometric conference at the University of Virginia. That did not seem to offer any conflict for my attending both meetings, as there were almost three days between the two. The AAVSO meeting would start on a Friday evening with a public lecture. I took the plane from Virginia to Boston on Thursday, on what appeared to be a beautiful flying day. But when I got to Boston, for no then-apparent reason the plane from Boston to Nantucket was delayed an hour at a time and was finally cancelled for the day. Then I was told there was a perilous rain storm on Nantucket! The same delays continued throughout the following day. I telephoned Janet and asked her to take charge of the AAVSO meetings until such time as I might get there. Finally I took the bus from Boston to Hyannis, and the boat from there to Nantucket. It was the roughest boat ride I ever experienced. Miraculously, just as our boat was entering Nantucket Harbor,

the rain stopped and the stars came out! I hurried over to the restaurant where the final banquet was just breaking up and the AAVSOers rushing to the telescopes to get some Nantucket observations.

Many of the AAVSO members reported to me how well Janet had conducted the meetings. One member, telescope maker Michael Mattei, was especially impressed. He lost no time introducing himself, and before long asked Janet to marry him. However, he respected and encouraged her desire first to complete her studies for a Master's degree, and was willing to wait. Janet pursued her studies and was awarded her Master of Science degree in 1972 for her thesis, *The T-Tauri Phenomena*. Janet and Mike then married on December 17, 1972.

When I heard that Margaret Mayall, the Director of the AAVSO, was again looking for an assistant at the same time that Janet informed me she was also looking for a job, I put the two in contact with each other and Janet got the job. Soon Margaret was about to retire. There were several qualified applicants for the directorship, but Janet was selected the new Director by the unanimous vote of the AAVSO Council.

In 1980, Janet and I visited Mexico when Pişmiş was being awarded an honor for her astronomical services to Mexico. This happy occasion was the last time I saw these friends together. Paris Pişmiş died in 1999.

With all her time-consuming administrative responsibilities Janet continued to work toward her Ph.D., which was awarded her in 1982 by Ege University in Turkey for her dissertation on SU UMa-type dwarf novae (Akyüz 1983).

Now our seemingly indispensable Janet is sadly gone. During her distressing seven months of disabling struggles with leukemia, she nevertheless kept up her interests in what was going on at the AAVSO. A successor will have difficulty in smoothly following in Janet's footsteps, but we wish that person successes stimulated by Janet's examples.

References

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