

## Gmunden'15: food for thought on astrophilately

ASITAF heavily participated in Gmunden 2015, the "international" exhibition held in the charming Austrian town of the same name, in the pleasant lake area near Salzburg.

Twenty astrophilately exhibits were on show altogether: five in the Rank 2 (National section) and fifteen in the Rank 1 (international section), presented by collectors from Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Romania and Italy. Eight out of the fifteen collections were presented by ASITAF (more than 50% - also four exhibitors from Austria, Belgium and The Netherlands were ASITAF Members).

Gmunden'15 provided the opportunity for an informal meeting of the FIP Astrophilately Commission with the participation of President Igor Rodin, the secretary Miri Mateika and many national delegates, together with a large group of collectors from Austria and Germany.

Unfortunately, due to a mishap that afternoon, I arrived at the meeting a bit late, when President Rodin was concluding his speech and the debate was starting among the delegates. The recurring temptation was to lead the debate in German.

It is not unusual that the topic in these meetings is complaining about the decrease in the number of collectors, the lack of interest by many exhibitors, and the countermeasures to cope with the phenomenon.



Guests of the Events were the cosmonauts Oleg Artemyev and Roman Romanenko

**Stephen Lachein** reported that although in Germany there are many hundreds of Astrophilately collectors (Weltraumphilatelie alone brings together 180 members) only one German exhibit was presented in Gmunden. «Unfortunately philately in our culture – Stephen says – is increasingly perceived as a non-serious activity and is often seen as a childish fun».

This is true not only in Germany. It is known that the number of collectors in the western world is drastically decreasing. Somebody reported that in China there are already few good collections “at FIP level”. Personally I’m very surprised that with two billion of inhabitants, the collections at “FIP level” are only “few”. This could mean that something is not working properly... maybe with astrophilately rules or the way of applying them.

**Alec Bartos** indicated two objectives on which

even our FIP Commission should work: 1. to attract new fans by showing that philately is a factor of culture and 2. to attract to Astrophilately philatelists who are already interested in space, such as fans of thematic philately.



**Umberto Cavallaro** stressed a third goal, which is by far a priority compared to the other two, and is that simple: *holding in Astrophilately active astrophilatelists: they have already demonstrated to have both passion and capability, they accept the challenge to build and exhibit their collections in this class.* It's important to inquire why out of so many collectors only few still participate in the official exhibitions and why all the others show no interest. But probably we all already know the answer.

The experience we had when AS.IT.AF was born few years ago led us to see with our own eyes a reality very similar to the one described by our German friend: the abandonment of astrophilately by collectors, even (and mostly) the young ones (consider that in Italy there is, for example, the biggest concentration of Apollo flown covers). It can be said that AS.IT.AF. started from a pile of rubble. At that time Astrophilatelists had decided to retire and did not want to hear anymore about exhibitions and organizations of any kind. Many of them had also begun to sell out their collections. It was not that difficult to understand why: a lot of restrictive rules, sometimes misunderstood (even by some old-style jurors) were often applied in an unclear and ambiguous way, with a punitive approach, according to the rule "Everybody is equal before the law, but some are more equal than others". The astrophilatelists in Italy (like everywhere) were, and still are, a species in danger of extinction, and should be regarded and treated "like the panda". By creating ASITAF we decided to break step and change pace. One important thing was to spread the astrophilately culture (having rare and expensive covers is not enough for building a good collection!) and we started doing it through articles, meetings and especially long personal rendez-vouses. With patient work many of

the "old" exhibitors were recovered (unfortunately not all) and for three years we organized non-competitive exhibitions, using them as a test and as a learning tool. The ones interested to start (or restart) exhibiting were helped to reorganize their collections according to FIP regulations, to set goals, to remove material that was not relevant, to make appropriate descriptions. The challenge was to demonstrate that a fair exhibit can also be built up with "normal and inexpensive items", with a good research (never ended), with elbow grease and with a proper presentation: without necessarily spending a fortune. Gradually new exhibits started to appear and, after some initial reluctance, the also several old collectors began to participate again.



*The special postmark for the event was designed by Alfred Gugerell (Austrian ASITAF Member) who also designed the Gagarin stamp used on this cover. The cover was then signed by Alfred Gugerell, Oleg Artemyev and Roman Romanenko*

The golden rule was to provide (what we now regularly do in Italy) written evaluations which identified problems, with detailed clarifications that would help to improve the next participation, so that it was unequivocally clear what were the problems met and what the possible solutions. It is important to understand that exhibiting is for fun, and that the exhibitor must feel he has been evaluated in a fair and respectful manner, with the application of criteria that are clearly explained and understood, and valid for all. It is also important that the exhibitor understands that his effort was appreciated. This not punitive attitude sometimes also leads to turn a blind eye on some minor errors, however clearly indicating them, so that they must be corrected for the next time. We keep in mind on one hand that learning how to build up an exhibit according astrophilately rules is not easy, and some small mistakes are always possible, and on the other hand that a collector who leaves, abandons forever. And if there is interest in developing astrophilately *it is unwise to discourage and dismiss those who have been there for years, and to eventually spend an inordinate amount of energy to try to identify and attract new potential collectors* whose "training" would take long time. Over the years the collections in ASITAF have begun to grow and, as of today, fifteen exhibits have been presented and they are (alas slowly!) gradually increasing in number and quality. Igor Rodin – during the meeting – complimented the Italian collections which *“even though they contain some mistakes, they are well set”*.



*On the left: cosmonauts Oleg Artemyev and Roman Romanenko visit the exhibition, on the right: Stefan Bruylants greets friends.*

Gmunden'15 was an opportunity to meet again many old friends and to make new ones. Unfortunately, despite this event pretended to be an "*International*" exhibition, everything – documents, materials, speeches, press conferences, meetings, etc., up to the final Palmares – was strictly in German, with little regard for the guests invited from other countries. I got wind of this "style" in the spring when we were invited to participate and we joined with the usual enthusiasm that characterizes our approach. The first cold-shower arrived when we got all the documentation in German. After some friendly insistence, we painstakingly achieved that at least some of the documents were translated into English, but not all. Some, like for example the essential application forms, were sent in German and in JPEG format, and I had to write and translate them myself.

The communication was, in short, a weak point of the organization of this event, marked by the carelessness reflected, for example – besides the very slow and patchy replies to our few questions – in the negligence in transcribing in the programme the names of the collectors. Three out of the eight names of Italian collectors were wrong (almost 40%) and errors, although timely reported, were not corrected, and in the final documentation they even managed to mistake a fourth name: mine.

I confess that I struggled to find in this organization the elegant, hospitable, caring, respectful Austria that – in the early seventies when I was a young student in Graz – had known, appreciated and learned to love.

Probably also other substantial reasons of discomfort are in the air. With this words Stefan Bruylants, President of COSMOS, the Belgian Astrophilately Society, concluded his article in the last issue of his Journal "Cosmos Express" (August 2015): «*Starting at the Salon of Astrophilately in Berlin 2013, I believe astrophilately will continue in its own way and when all astro clubs in Europe and the world can work together, we might have a great future and, if needed, we will bring our own exhibitions, maybe not FIP-supported, but on a friendly base.*»

Is it really this what we want? Wouldn't be worth sitting around a table and discuss about astro rules and interpretation?