

1 June 2023, Warsaw

Dear ladies, gentleman, colleagues, and friends

On the 24 February 2023 the Scientific Council of the Nicolaus Copernicus Astronomical Center of the Polish Academy of Sciences decided to award professor Marek Sarna with a Nicolaus Copernicus Astronomical Center Medal for his key role and leading the Polish participation in the SALT telescope. On behalf of the Council, I would like now to briefly present the outstanding role of professor Sarna in the project, but note here that it is only one of his valuable achievements in science and in the service for the broad Polish astronomical community.

In 1999 the government of Poland and South Africa signed a bilateral cooperation agreement which resulted in the Polish participation in building the South African Large Telescope (SALT). Professor Marek Sarna became the main coordinator of the Polish participation in SALT and since year 2000 has been also the Polish representative in the Council of the SALT Foundation. He put a lot of effort into securing a strong Polish participation in building and the exploitation of the telescope. As a result, Poland is the third largest shareholder in the project and our astronomers have had access to 10% of the observing time at the telescope for over 20 years now. Along the way, Polish astronomers gained access to other observing facilities in the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO). Professor Sarna is also the main initiator and co-founder of the Polish SALT Foundation, which – among other activities – organized the current conference. Since 2001 professor Sarna is the chair of the Polish SALT Foundation. In this role, he participated in creating the logistics and infrastructure necessary to handle the proposal submission, the reviewing process, and data archives.

Joining SALT was an unprecedented achievement for Polish astronomy, as SALT was the first big project that granted Polish astronomers access to a world-class observatory. To illustrate the gravity of this point, let me briefly go back to the early 2000s, when I was an undergraduate student of astronomy in Toruń, interested mainly in optical observational astronomy. Back then, Polish astronomers did not have easy access to big observing facilities, especial in the visual domain. Poland's participation in European Astronomical Observatory was not even at the horizon back then (this happened only in 2014), so young aspiring astronomers did not see much future for competitive observational astronomy in the country. This has changed entirely when we – the undergraduate students – were told about the exciting new possibility: that Polish astronomers will have a chance to get observing time at an enormous optical telescope located at a dry site. This possibility sounded fantastic and definitely changed our attitude towards devoting early careers to observational astronomy.

Today, we celebrate professor's Sarna contribution to making those dreams possible. The SALT project in Poland was but only the first major milestone in his efforts to increase Polish participation in large observing projects. As a director of the Nicolaus

Copernicus Astronomical Center, he always promoted big instrumental projects, as a way of obtaining competitive observing data, gaining observational and engineering expertise, and securing extra resources for the Center. It would not be an overstatement that this approach, started with SALT, gave fruits in Polish participation in large projects, like INTEGRAL, *Herschel*, H.E.S.S., CTA, Solaris, BRITE, LIGO/Virgo, Araucaria, to name a few.

Professor's Sarna devotion to the SALT project resulted in interesting and impactful research led by Polish astronomers. Over four hundred refereed papers (<https://salt.camk.edu.pl/PL/Publikacje/index.html>) based entirely or in part on SALT data have been published with participation of Polish astronomers. Some of them appeared in the most prestigious journals, including *Nature* and *Nature Astronomy*. Polish astronomers use SALT for a wide range of research areas including observations of Solar System objects, normal and eruptive stars, transients, active galactic nuclei and other extragalactic sources. (The participants of the conference will hear more about some of those results over the next few days). There have been tens of doctoral and bachelor thesis prepared at Polish universities and institutes based on data from SALT, so many of us owe professor Sarna a great deal.

On behalf of the Scientific Council of CAMK and a broader Polish astronomical academic community, it is my great honor to thank professor Sarna for all his efforts in obtaining and sustaining the Polish participation in SALT.

Tomasz Kamiński
Vice chair of the Science Council of CAMK