

Lodewijk Woltjer (1930–2019)

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¹ ESO

“Lo” Woltjer (b. Noordwijk 1930, d. 2019) was ESO Director General from 1975 to 1987. Despite originally studying geology, Lo was to become one of the youngest professors of astronomy in the Netherlands. From there he went to the USA to chair the department of astronomy at Columbia University from 1964 to 1974. He related to ESO early on and realised the potential an international organisation had for European astronomy, in keeping with the spirit of its founders.

Lo Woltjer’s scientific interests were initially focused on the Crab Nebula supernova remnant. He also made extensive contributions to the study of quasars and magnetic fields in stars and galaxies.

When he was appointed ESO Director General in 1975 he reshaped the Organisation in line with a unique ambition, emphasising in-house technical developments initiated with the support of CERN. He later engaged ESO in collaborations with industry and astronomy institutions across Europe. In his proposal for the ESO directorship he conditioned his acceptance on the creation of a scientific department at ESO in order to anchor the role of Organisation in the European community.

During his thirteen years as Director General ESO became the world-class institution it is today. The financial contribution of its Member States increased vastly over his tenure. Italy and Switzerland joined the Organisation, followed by other European countries. The Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (MPG)/ESO 2.2-metre telescope and the Swedish–ESO Submillimetre Telescope (SEST) antenna saw their first light at La Silla observatory as well as an ever-larger set of advanced instrumentation during his tenure at ESO. The New Technology Telescope (NTT) was designed thanks to the joining fees provided by Italy and Switzerland when they joined ESO. Lo Woltjer also established an interface with the European Space Agency (ESA) through the Space Telescope European Coordinating Facil-

ity, which he decided should be hosted at the ESO Headquarters in Garching.

However, clearly his leading achievement remains the Very Large Telescope (VLT) conceptual design outlined in his blue book and subsequently approved by ESO Council in 1987. The new observatory site was selected on the Paranal mountain. In the VLT design, Lo included an interferometric mode, an option which was not met with universal enthusiasm in the scientific community at the time but has subsequently proved to be visionary.

Lo Woltjer became President of the International Astronomical Union and later served as Chair of the ESA Space Science Advisory Committee. He was instrumental in the development of the European Astronomical Society (EAS), whose annual lectures carry his name. He was honoured with the Karl Schwarzschild medal of the Astronomische Gesellschaft (German Astronomical Society) and was a member of several national science academies.

Who was Lo Woltjer?

Lo was an enigmatic personality with a strong determination to promote European astronomy and raise ESO to the status of a world class Institution. He was a natural leader with outstanding managerial skills. If intelligence is defined as the ability to convert raw information into practical and challenging developments, he must be portrayed as an exceptional masterminding individual. He fully identified with his mission. Everybody connected to the Organisation was aware of that simple equation: Woltjer was ESO and ESO was Woltjer. Some of his struggles and achievements are summarised

in his book “Europe Conquest of the Universe”. With Roger Bonnet, ESA’s Director of Scientific Programmes, he wrote “Surviving 1000 centuries. Can we do it?” – a perfect illustration of his extended range of interests.

He was not an easy guest on planet Earth. The suitcase in his hand was as much a symbol as a travel outfit. He hated public exposure and confrontations, maintaining a formal distance behind an elegant style. It was not always easy to guess what he had in mind, often hiding behind nonchalant gestures and leaving to others the challenge of interpreting his purpose. Highly respected, at times very much admired for his courage, he could be very stubborn in imposing his will. In his function as ESO Director General he also had to make diplomatic compromises, but most of the time he managed to impose his own views. For those who had the privilege to interact with him, whether under his leadership or privately, he was a beacon and a reference point.

Lo was also a lover of the Sun with a passion for the outdoors, whether in Saint Michel l’Observatoire, on canoeing trips with his daughter Eleonore, or hiking and swimming at Lago Rupanco in the south of Chile. Six months ago, his wife Ulla died. She was of outstanding assistance to him and provided an enjoyable link to his social environment both in Europe and Chile. His health failed over the last few months of his life, his legs gave way and he broke a shoulder. With Ulla gone he lost interest in life and slowly faded away. He was 89 years old.

Figure 1. Lodewijk Woltjer welcoming guests at the inauguration of the headquarters at ESO Garching.

