

Memorial to Vladimir Joseph Okulitch

1906–1995

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Vladimir J. Okulitch died of a heart attack in Calgary on August 31, 1995, in his 90th year. Thus, Canada and the world of science lost an extraordinary geologist, teacher, astronomer, and university administrator. I lost my first teacher in paleontology and a longtime friend. Vladimir was focused on geology, but his interests extended beyond the earth to all the stars in the universe. He was a naturalist in the true sense, and for decades he observed and photographed the changing earth, its rocks, rivers, mountains, and all living things. Photography was a passion all his life, and his work was exhibited at amateur and professional shows throughout North America. Above all, Vladimir was a warm and gentle humanist with an easy ability to laugh, and he was beloved as a teacher and an administrator. Not surprisingly, he had a holistic view of the evolving earth and all its life forms. He stressed the need to understand the interdependence of geology, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology in the resolution of earth science problems. He beamed with enthusiasm when he taught paleontology, and it always seemed clear to students that the study of life on earth, past and present, was special in his heart.



Vladimir Okulitch was born on June 18, 1906, in St. Petersburg, Russia. His schooling in St. Petersburg was rigorous in the classical style, and each school day classes in languages, mathematics, the sciences, and history were followed by tutorials in every subject. Throughout his life he was proud of his Russian heritage; he continued to read Russian literature, and Lermontov, Pushkin, and Tolstoy were among his favorites. He spoke pure Russian beautifully. A few months before Vladimir's death, I visited St. Petersburg, and when I returned I described what I had observed in his beloved birthplace. He treated me to a passionate and lucid description of his early life and schooling in Russia. Vladimir noted with pride that some years earlier, his son Andrew, a colleague of mine in the Geological Survey of Canada, rediscovered the original Okulitch house in St. Petersburg.

Vladimir's father, Joseph Konstantine Okulitch, had been the Actual Councillor of State for the Russian Imperial government and Plenipotentiary Representative of the Siberian government (1919) to England, France, and the United States. Thus, his father traveled extensively and, in addition to being educated in various schools in Russia, Vladimir attended the Russo-Serbian Lyceum in Belgrade as well as the Peabody Grammar School, High School, and Latin School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Vladimir arrived in Canada in 1927 after graduation from the Lyceum in Belgrade. In 1931 he received his B.A.Sc. degree and in 1932 his M.A.Sc. degree in geological engineering from the University of British Columbia. During those years he worked periodically at the old Britannia Mine in southern British Columbia and at the Atlin Silver-Lead mine in northern British Columbia. In 1934, he completed his Ph.D. degree at McGill University in Montreal under the supervision of Professor T. H. Clark; his dissertation was entitled "Stratigraphy and Palaeontology of the Black River Group (Ordovician) in the Vicinity of Montreal." This was published as a

Geological Survey of Canada Memoir in 1936. Also in 1934, he married Susanne Kouhar from Vancouver; Andrew Vladimir was born in 1941 and Peter in 1946.

From 1934 to 1936 Vladimir was a research fellow in paleontology at Harvard University, where he worked with Percy Raymond, whom he admired for the rest of his life. He taught geology at the University of Toronto from 1936 to 1944, and in 1944 he jumped at the chance to return to his adopted homeland, the west coast, to begin teaching in the Department of Geology and Geography, headed at the time by M. Y. Williams, at the University of British Columbia. He became head of the department in 1952. In 1959, the UBC Senate approved the separation of the department into two parts; and during that year Vladimir was named the R. W. Brock professor and head of the Department of Geology. In the academic year 1963–1964, he was Acting dean of science as well as head of the Department of Geology and the Department of Mining and Geological Engineering. In 1964 he was named UBC's first dean of science, and he served in that capacity with great distinction until his retirement in 1971. Vladimir was succeeded as dean of science by his brother-in-law, George Volkoff, then one of Canada's leading theoretical physicists, who at one time had studied under Robert Oppenheimer.

Vladimir was devastated by the death of his wife, Susanne, in 1968. She had been a loving companion and a pillar of strength to him. Also in 1968, funding was canceled for the Queen Elizabeth Observatory at Mount Kobau in the Okanagan Valley of south-central British Columbia. The observatory had been one of Vladimir's dreams. It was to contain a giant telescope to study distant galaxies and their movements and the origin of stars and their movements in our own galaxy. Vladimir fought to keep the project alive with the tenacity of a tiger through to the end of his tenure as dean. He had hoped that the observatory might become the adopted child of all Canadian universities and that it could become a principal base for Canadian astronomers to train and work. Unfortunately, no consensus could be reached among Canadian astronomers, and the mirror was eventually installed in a joint U.S.–French–Canadian Observatory in Hawaii.

Vladimir Okulich published some 60 scientific reports on lower Paleozoic fossils and stratigraphy in both eastern and western Canada. All of his publications reflect painstaking, thorough research and are characterized by precise descriptions complemented by clear illustrations. Perhaps his most important paleontological work was on a group of Cambrian marine fossils in what is now known as the Phylum Archaeocyatha. The group is characterized by conical calcareous skeletons with concentric outer and inner walls. For more than 80 years, after E. Billing first described the genus *Archaeocyatha* from the Cambrian of Labrador in 1861, the biological affinities of the group had been obscure and, indeed, are still being debated. Archaeocyathids were variously grouped with corals, sponges, protozoans, foraminifers, or calcareous algae. While he was at Harvard as a postdoctoral research associate, Vladimir began to study archaeocyathids with Percy Raymond and, in 1943, he concluded that they were calcareous sponges that he designated Class Pleospongia. Later, he included the Pleospongia in Class Archaeocyathia. Vladimir, however, never felt comfortable with placing the Archaeocyathia in the Porifera as an independent class because of basic morphological differences. In 1953, he concluded, in a paper with M. W. de Laubenfels, that the Pleospongia (Class Archaeocyathia) should be placed in Phylum Archaeocyatha and, along with Phylum Porifera should constitute the sub-kingdom Anthozoa. He was clearly the authority on the subject, and in 1955 he described the morphology and showed the systematic relationships of the Archaeocyatha in a volume of the Geological Society of America's Treatise on Invertebrate Paleontology (Part E). His paleontological work has withstood the test of time, and his benchmark interpretations of the Archaeocyatha are still basic references.

Vladimir was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, the Geological Society of America, the Paleontological Society, and the Geological Association of Canada. He was extremely active

in the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, and in 1972 the University of British Columbia honored him with the designation Emeritus Dean of Science.

Vladimir gave his time and energy freely to students, and he delighted in sharing and explaining his ideas on the evolution of life and particularly the phylogenesis and ecology of the Archaeocyatha and trilobites. He was a kind and gentle teacher, but he expected his students to work hard. During the late 1940s and 1950s, when he was still active in research and teaching, he published several papers with his students, including Fred Roots, Sam Nelson, Bob Greggs, and Yosh Kawase. A few years ago, when Sam Nelson retired from the University of Calgary after a distinguished career in teaching paleontology, Vladimir confided that he had not really started feeling old until he saw his former students retiring.

I first met Vladimir Okulitch in 1957 when I enrolled in his class in historical geology at UBC. It was a defining moment, for he was to become a powerful influence in my life. I was enthralled by his extraordinary eloquence and his passion for science. The next year, in his introductory paleontology course, I decided that I must study geology and that fossils were my major interest. Subsequently, I completed dissertations on Paleozoic ammonoids while attaining M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Iowa, and have been studying fossils happily ever since. During the next several years, Professor Okulitch and I were attracted to each other because of our common interest in fossils and possibly because of my obvious Slavic (Ukrainian) name. He became an informal counselor and a friend. He was one of a very few professors I had met at UBC who seemed to be genuinely interested in me as a person. He was warm and generous with his ideas and his time and, more, he was inspirational! When I graduated from UBC in 1960 I had an occasion to discuss my future with him. I had opportunities to join a mining company in Manitoba permanently or to join the Geological Survey of Canada in Ottawa for a one-year term. Professor Okulitch declared that his summers with the Survey were the best learning experiences in his geological life. He thought that I was a Survey "type" and recommended that I choose that organization, which I did.

For the next 30 years, I saw Vladimir only rarely, but in 1990 he moved to Calgary to be near his son Andrew, and so our friendship blossomed again. For the last five years of his life, Vladimir would come to the Survey occasionally to chat with friends and to "find out what's going on." Occasionally, we would have lunch together, often with our friend and McGill and Survey alumnus, Ward Neale. We always discussed the changing world of science, particularly paleontology. We reminisced about the old days at UBC and the whereabouts and activities of former students and professors. Vladimir was wide-eyed with excitement when I told him that two former geology students from UBC, Stewart Blusson, who was in my class of 1960, and Chuck Fipke, had discovered diamondiferous kimberlites in the Canadian Shield. He enjoyed remembering his association with his Ph.D. supervisor Tom Clark, still active at McGill at age 102! He also talked fondly of Percy Raymond at Harvard and his Burgess Shale work, and many other colleagues in universities and agencies across the continent.

I visited Vladimir on four occasions during the last month of his life. He was even more reflective than previously and expressed his love for his family and his reverence for his early life in Russia and Canada, and he commented on the dignity and mortality of man; then, he was gone.

Vladimir is survived by his son Andrew, daughter-in-law Melynda, and their two children, Susanne and Daniel; by his son Peter, daughter-in-law Judy, and their two children, George and Katie; and his sister Olga and her husband, George Volkoff. Vladimir will be missed by his many friends and by neighbors, students, past and present colleagues at the University of British Columbia, and members of his beloved photographic circle in Vancouver.

Memorial services were held in Calgary and at the University of British Columbia. All in attendance were invited to select photographs from thousands that Vladimir had taken over a

lifetime, to remember a quiet and decent man of dignity with a passion for teaching and a passion for learning about the earth and the universe.

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