

## Willy Ley, Prolific Science Writer, Is Dead at 62

*Prophesied Travel in Space  
in Book Issued in 1926*

By WALTER SULLIVAN

Willy Ley, who helped usher in the age of rocketry and then became perhaps its chief popularizer, died yesterday morning at his home in Jackson Heights, Queens. His age was 62.

Mr. Ley, the author of more than 30 books in English and German, was a frequent lecturer as well as teacher and industrial consultant.

His death, apparently from a heart attack, came suddenly. About a week ago a medical checkup had disclosed a circulatory disorder and he was taking digitalis.

Earlier in the day, in a telephone conversation with a book publisher, Mr. Ley spoke of the possibility that he might have to follow man's first flight to the moon by television from his home, instead of from the Manned Spacecraft Center in Texas. It was a disappointing prospect, for Mr. Ley had been one of the earliest protagonists of such a flight.

He was born in Berlin in 1906 and his early studies, at the Universities of Berlin and Königsberg, were in astronomy, physics, zoology and paleontology (the study of fossils). Some of his most successful books were on exotic beasts of fact and myth.

However, in 1927 he and his German colleagues were inspired by the writings of Hermann Oberth to found the Society for Space Travel. A punctilious registrar in Breslau at first refused to permit the group to incorporate under the title Verein für Raumschiffahrt because, he said, the last word of the title (meaning "space travel") did not exist in the German language.

### Collaborated on Films

Mr. Ley's first book on space travel appeared in 1926 and during that period he collaborated with Fritz Lang in several German science-fiction films, including one entitled "Frau im Mond" ("Woman in the Moon").

Among those whom he recruited into the Society for Space Travel was a young man named Werner Von Braun who ultimately became a leader in German military rocket development. After World War II, when Dr. Von Braun had begun working with the American rocket program, he and Mr. Ley collaborated on several books including "The Exploration of Mars."

As the Nazis rose to power they were determined to take over rocket research from the society. The latter, through a series of flights with primitive liquid-fueled rockets from an abandoned ammunition dump on the outskirts of Berlin, had shown that rockets could be used to circumvent provisions in the Versailles Treaty forbidding German development of artillery.

In 1935, Mr. Ley got word to Dutch and British friends that he was in trouble with the Gestapo. He had been ordered to cease writing on rocketry for foreign publications and did so, but some of his earlier articles being held in reserve by



Willy Ley

British newspapers appeared after this edict.

Mr. Ley left for Britain and then was brought to the United States under the auspices of the American Interplanetary Society (which about this time changed its name to the American Rocket Society). Members of this group put up bond to permit his entry into the country.

### Built Test Stand

Mr. Ley lived for half a year with G. Edward Pendray, head of the American Rocket Society, and the two men built a test stand for small rockets near Mr. Pendray's home in Crestwood, N. Y. It was in a swamp between Scarsdale and Bronxville.

Mr. Pendray recalled yesterday the alarm of neighbors at the roaring of rockets on their test stand. However Mr. Ley's activities as an experimenter gave way to concentration on writing.

He turned out a steady stream of books and articles. Interest in rocketry and space travel was low at the time and his titles ran to such subjects as "Salamanders and Other Wonders," "Dragons in Amber" and "The Lungfish, The Dodo and the Unicorn."

However when the rockets developed by his former colleagues in Germany began flying across the English Channel, there was a dramatic change. The demand for expert writing on rocketry became insatiable.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ley in 1940 joined the newspaper PM as science editor and soon met a Russian-born ballet dancer, Olga Feldman, who was writing a column on physical fitness for the newspaper. They were married in 1941.

Soon afterward, Mrs. Ley was doing research for her husband at a public library and read to him, over the phone, certain information on rockets that she had uncovered there. Someone in the next phone booth overheard transmission of this information in a Russian accent and reportedly notified the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

It took a certain amount of explaining to convince the Federal authorities that nothing untoward was going on.

### Fled Germany in '35—Tested Rockets in Westchester

In 1944 he became a United States citizen and left PM. He became further identified with space travel with such books as "Watchers of the Skies," "Conquest of Space" and "Rockets, Missiles and Men in Space." He also developed a powerful lecture style.

One close acquaintance noted yesterday that Mr. Ley's big frame and German accent conspired to give him an impressively authoritative manner. Perhaps, he suggested, that was why Mr. Ley unconsciously retained the accent, even though he became fluent in his spoken and written English.

One of those who knew him well said he was a natural lecturer, "not only on the platform, but in private."

"If you asked him a question you got a lecture," he said, adding that Mr. Ley's knowledge was "encyclopedic."

Mr. Ley enjoyed good food, good drink and good conversation and belonged to a small convivial group of writers and scholars known as the "Trap Door Spiders," who met once a month. The name, members say, is based on the practice of such spiders in closing a trap door to escape their mates.

He was a great admirer of Wagner operas and could accompany himself on the piano as he sang Wagnerian arias.

Publishing associates said yesterday that Mr. Ley had at least six books under contract. He had told Scribners that next Monday he would deliver the final section of "Man and the Moon," a major work, in preparation for five years. It deals with the role of the moon in music and literature.

Mr. Ley, one of his book editors said, was "like those 19th-century natural scientists who were up on every field of science." He had been on the faculty of Fairleigh Dickinson University for many years.

While Mr. Ley was an ardent promoter of trips to Mars and other distant bodies, his earliest passion was for the moon.

"The moon is still silvery in the night sky," he wrote in the New York Times last year, "but it is no longer unreachable."

"In 1930 I introduced a number of aeronautical engineers in Berlin to the first liquid fuel rocket they had ever seen," he said. "It stood about 5 feet tall and, even when fueled, was light enough to be lifted with one hand. It could climb about 1500 feet and was brought back by parachute."

"What, the engineers wanted to know, was the aim of all this? Eventually, I replied, rockets of this type will carry men to the moon."

Mr. Ley lived to within one month of the scheduled fulfillment of his prophecy.

Besides his widow, he is survived by two daughters, Sandra Ley and Mrs. Xenia Parker of 252 East 61st Street. Since World War II Mr. Ley had lived at 37-26 77th Street in Jackson Heights.

The funeral will take place tomorrow at 1 P.M. at the Walter B. Cooke funeral home, 1504 Third Avenue.