Piotr Leonidovich Kapitza

With his scientific contributions spanning more than fifty years, physics lost one of its monumental figures when Piotr Kapitza died on 8 April. He was born in Kronstadt, Russia, in 1894, and after initial training as an engineer became a lecturer at the Petrograd (Leningrad) Polytechnical Institute in 1919. However his research career began in earnest when he came to the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge, UK, in 1921 to work with Rutherford. The story goes that Rutherford initially told Kapitza he could not take on another research student. However after pointing out that one extra student would change the research staff complement by less than the ten per cent accuracy inherent in Rutherford's own measurements, he was accepted. His early work at Cambridge was on classical nuclear physics, however he soon displayed his strong flair for technical applications, in particular the generation of strong magnetic fields. During his later years at Cambridge, Kapitza also turned to the work in low temperature physics that was to continue for much of his life. In 1933 he was appointed Director of the newly created Mond Laboratory at Cambridge, but the following year he returned to the USSR to become Director of the Institute of Physical Problems of the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow. There his work in physics continued to expand, leading to important contributions to cryogenics and to high power electronics. From time to time he turned his attention to interesting topics in basic general physics. In 1978, he shared the Nobel Physics Prize with Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson. In addition, this giant of modern physics was showered with awards from both his native country (the Order of Lenin no less than six times) and abroad, with recognition from the UK, USA, France, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Yugoslavia, Finland, Czechoslovakia, India, Germany, Denmark...