
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**Space Shuttle Stowaway Is A Commie Mole --- A Venerable Czech Cartoon Character Infiltrates NASA**

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PRAGUE -- When the Space Shuttle Endeavour lifts off in April, joining the astronauts on board will be an unlikely passenger: **Krtek** the Little Mole.

The Little Mole -- actually, an eight-inch plush version engineered to meet NASA specifications -- will be making one giant step for Czech pop culture during a two-week voyage to the International Space Station.

Krtek, pronounced KUR-tek, was created in the 1950s by Czech animator Zdenek Miler and quickly became a children's cartoon favorite, spreading across the Communist world, from Eastern Europe to Cuba, Vietnam and China.

By the late 1960s, **Krtek**, which has big eyes, a red nose and three strands of hair sprouting from the top of his head -- had vaulted over the Iron Curtain to Western Europe, and animated films featuring the Little Mole became a major source of hard-currency earnings for Czechoslovakia.

Astronaut Andrew Feustel, whose mother-in-law was born in Znojmo, a small town near the Czech Republic's border with Austria, decided to bring **Krtek** along next month as one of the handful of personal items crew members are allowed to carry into space.

"My hope was to select an item that would capture the attention of both children and adults," Mr. Feustel says. "**Krtek** has delighted the imagination of the Czech people for many generations."

On his last trip into space, in 2009, Mr. Feustel carried a book of 19th-century Czech poetry, titled "Cosmic Songs." The book didn't generate as much buzz for space exploration among young people as the Astronomical Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences had hoped. "We hope that younger generations will be inspired by [**Krtek's**] adventure and recognize that their dreams are within reach," Mr. Feustel says. The institute and the U.S. Embassy in Prague blessed the plan.

Krtek and his 62 films have been a success in markets from Japan to France, but he has never found a foothold in the English-speaking world. "**Krtek's** space flight may help popularize him -- even in America," says Jana Mala, head of Moravska Ustredna, a manufacturing cooperative that is the exclusive maker of **Krtek** plush toys in the Czech Republic. Last year, the company sold \$1.5 million in stuffed Krteks, she says. The **Krtek** franchise generates millions of dollars a year for its creator and the small number of companies that own distribution rights and licenses to make Little Mole merchandise.

Moravska Ustredna produced the lighter and smaller version of a **Krtek** hand puppet that will travel aboard the Endeavour. Shuttle crew members are allowed to bring up to 20 personal items, which must weigh a total of less than 1.5 pounds and fit in a Personal Preference Kit the size of a paperback book.

On past missions, astronauts have carried things ranging from flags and old school memorabilia to Luke Skywalker's light saber and a Boston Pops conductor's baton. Much of this stuff ends up in museums and display cases.

The Endeavour flight will be **Krtek's** first voyage outside the Earth's atmosphere. But it won't be his first trip on a rocket ship.

In "Little Mole and the Rocket," from 1965, **Krtek** flies around the world before crash-landing on a small island. Local animals help him reassemble his craft and fly home.

"I never imagined anything like this for **Krtek**," says his creator, Mr. Miler, now 90 years old and living in an

assisted-living facility. "But I think the character has earned it himself, and it's a big honor."

Krtek was born after Mr. Miler's bosses at a state-owned film company told him to make an animated movie to teach children how clothing is manufactured. Mr. Miler says he racked his brain to come up with an animal that hadn't already been used by Disney.

"I decided to go for a walk," Mr. Miler says. "I told myself that if I couldn't figure it out by the time I finished, I would call it quits." In a meadow, he stumbled over a mole hill and found his concept.

In "How Little Mole Got His Pants," from 1957, **Krtek** learned how linen was made and then fashioned into the overalls -- with two large pockets -- that he has worn ever since. The film won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival that year.

Aimed at children under 5 years old, the **Krtek** films that followed have largely avoided spoken words, relying instead on onomatopoeic utterances such as phew, brrrr and oof, making them accessible to children around the world.

Krtek cartoons differ from many of their American counterparts, lacking the fast-paced action common in shows on American TV. One Little Mole cartoon has **Krtek** helping a lost rabbit find its way home. In another, he cares for a bird with a broken wing.

"Besides Miler, only a few other authors wrote plots and stories for **Krtek** and Miler filtered them very thoroughly," says Jiri Kubicek, who studies animated films at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. "He was absolutely against any kind of violence."

There have been no new **Krtek** animations since 2002, when "The Little Mole and Little Frog" was released. No new books have been published since 2004. It is unclear whether **Krtek** will have any new adventures after his return from outer space.

"I'm 90 years old, so I don't know how much longer I'm going to be here," says Mr. Miler.

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