

Essay competition prizewinner

Our first international meeting in Prague

By Gerta Vrbová-Hilton

During the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia the German authorities tried to destroy Czech Universities and scientific activities. In the new Czechoslovakia, after the Second World War, these institutions had to be rebuilt, and this reconstruction of intellectual and scientific life was supported even by the communist regime.

Part of this effort was the establishment of the Institute of Physiology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science, where I worked as a scientist since 1952. Nevertheless, contact with the West was discouraged, and my fellow scientists and I felt isolated. Somehow, in 1956 I managed to attend a scientific meeting in Paris. On my return I discussed my experiences with my colleagues and told them about the interest many of my French colleagues expressed about our work. Above all, I felt proud that they thought that our work in Prague was exciting and innovative.

Their enthusiasm and appreciation of our work encouraged us to try harder to make contact with other scientists from different countries and initiated the idea to organize an International meeting concerned with our work in Prague.

It was quite a difficult and challenging task to organize an international meeting in Czechoslovakia in 1956, at the very height of the cold war. The aftermath of the political trials in the early 50s and the paranoia about the treacherous West, made it hard for us to get support and funding for a conference that would include scientists from the West. And yet there was a great desire, both on our side and on the side of our colleagues from the West, to exchange experiences and meet. Many of our colleagues from England and France, were members of an organization called 'Science for Peace' which tried, through personal contacts and by providing help to colleagues in Eastern Europe, to establish closer links between scientists who were divided by the Iron Curtain during the cold war.

In our Institute we were fortunate that we had access to international scientific journals, and were informed about the progress made outside the Eastern block. We therefore could select colleagues who worked on similar scientific problems to those that we were interested in and keep in touch with them. This was helped by the fact that several members of our group spoke excellent English. We were particularly fortunate that the head of our group, Ernest Gutmann had many international contacts, since he had worked in England as a scientist during the war. Thus, it was mainly thanks to Ernest that in 1956 we were able to organize a meeting to discuss the topic we were interested in i.e. the influence of nerves on muscle.

We got permission to invite colleagues from France, England, and the USA, in addition to those from Hungary, Poland, Russia and China. To our surprise, most of the colleagues we invited accepted our invitation, even though we could offer them little financial support to attend the meeting. To compensate for this we managed to secure a beautiful venue for the conference; a delightful old monastery in Strahov near the Prague castle. The Czechoslovakian government wanted to impress our foreign visitors by showing them that science was well supported in a Communist country, and the Czech Academy of Sciences therefore provided us with various perks, such as allowing us to use their chauffeur driven vehicles to pick up our visitors from the airport, and for making it possible for us to organize some trips to show them the beauty of our country.

My task was to fetch a distinguished Chinese and a French colleague from the airport and take them to their hotel. The following day the conference started, and we hoped that all our preparations would be successful and that the meeting would not only be interesting but also enjoyable.

Some of the conference participants from England also brought their wives with them, and we had to provide a 'social program' for them. There were several differences between my Russian colleagues and those from Western countries. Our Russian colleagues were tense, shabbily dressed, rather subdued and not accompanied by their wives or husbands. Only when they had drunk some alcohol did they relax a bit, and then they had very strange habits.

One large Russian scientist loved beer, but before he drank it he put a lot of salt into it. This produced a small explosion a lot of foam and a terrible mess. God knows how the beer tasted, but Ernest Gutmann was suitably impressed. Our colleagues from Britain and France were more relaxed, and easier to talk to.

Sidney Hilton a physiologist from London was particularly curious about everything, our work, our lives, families and culture. Another colleague who was also eager to learn about how we lived was a French biochemist, Jean Dreyfus. He sympathized with our political system and wanted to learn more about how it worked.

We spent many hours discussing the advantages and problems of living in two different social systems, and I couldn't help feeling disadvantaged living under the communist system. It became clear that our working conditions were inferior to those of our colleagues from the West. While our Western colleagues had access to modern equipment and chemicals we were restricted to much more basic facilities and our work was constrained by shortages unknown to our western colleagues.

One evening after the meeting finished a few of us were sitting in [a] small café just behind Prague castle and felt particularly relaxed. From our Institute there was Olga Hudlická, Ernest Gutmann and myself, and only two Western colleagues were with us, Jean Dreyfus and Sidney Hilton.

Dreyfus turned to me and asked: 'Why do you always start your papers by praising an established Russian scientist, even though his work has nothing to do with yours?' My friends told me that my face turned bright pink. I felt even worse than I looked, for how can I explain to these people who were completely free to think and write whatever they wanted that we were not free to do so. I pulled myself together and gave a dangerously honest answer:

'The leadership of the Academy of Sciences demands that we should pay lip service to Soviet Science, and since the funding of our Institute, and indeed our jobs depend on the people in charge of the Academy, we feel that this is a small price to pay for their support.'

My colleagues and I felt deeply embarrassed, but at least we had given our friends from the West an honest answer. I then turned to my English colleague Sidney Hilton: 'What is it like in England? How do you get money for your work?' Sidney tried to explain: 'Some funding is available at Universities, but if you have a special project then you have to apply to the Medical Research Council, who will get your application reviewed by experts and then decide whether or not to fund it.'

'As you see, our system also is not impartial, for whether or not you will get funded depends on the colleagues who may or may not like your work, and there is of course a lot of personal bias in these assessments.' The answer pleased me, for I felt that maybe the system in the West was not perfect either.

We took our guests back to the hotel, where Sidney's wife Beth was waiting for him. Her shiny black hair was cut short, and suited her attractive, quite exotic looking face. She was pregnant, but in spite of that moved gracefully. She was smartly dressed, her clothes simple and well cut.

She told us that she had had a very good day, sightseeing and enjoyed her stay in Prague. We discussed the plan for the next day,

Essay competition prizewinner

'It was a wonderful day which showed no barriers erected by cold war rhetoric can stop friendship and love'

when all the participants of the meeting were to be driven by coach to Zvikov a castle just outside Prague. We planned to have a picnic near Orlik, a particularly attractive spot near a reservoir formed by a dam on the river Vltava.

Beth wasn't sure whether she would come, for she feared the trip might be too strenuous for her, but she insisted that Sidney should go with the rest of us. We left our guests in the hotel and went home. I was pleased, for it had been a long day and I was looking forward to see my children, who were with their baby minder, tetinka Dvořáčková. I picked them up, and we went to our little flat, where we had something to eat, played and went to bed.

The next morning the coach picked us up outside Strahov monastery and we went on our trip. Our first stop was Zvikov a spectacular gothic castle situated at the confluence of the Vltava and Otava rivers, surrounded almost entirely by water. It has a magnificent arcaded gallery, and a chapel.

We walked around the castle, and the atmosphere had a deep influence on us. Sidney attached himself to me, and I enjoyed being near him. We walked together and almost without noticing started to hold hands. I wasn't concerned that we were becoming attached to each other, and that I was ignoring the fact that Sidney was

married, for I thought that he would leave for England in two days time and I will probably never see him again.

Yet on that day in Zvikov being with him and touching him felt very good. I could not have envisaged that in spite of all the obstacles we would develop a passionate loving relationship during the next few years, which will throw our lives into turmoil, and instigate my dangerous escape from Czechoslovakia.

Symbolically, on the day of our trip it was very hot, and by lunchtime, we were ready to cool down. The next stopover on the way back to Prague was at a castle called Orlik close to a large reservoir formed by a dam. After we had briefly toured Orlik castle, Olga suggested that we should go for a swim.

This idea was taken up with great enthusiasm, but only Olga and I had brought a swimming costume, so the only way to allow our guests to enjoy a swim was to share the two swimming costumes.

Conveniently only two of our guests wanted a swim: the Frenchman Dreyfus and the Englishman Sidney Hilton. Sidney was quick to book my swimming costume, and Dreyfus had Olga's. Olga and I went for a swim first, and it was wonderfully enjoyable. The water was clear and cool, and after our exertion in the heat we felt thoroughly refreshed. We were sorry we could not splash about in the water together with the

rest of the party, but there was nothing we could do.

We got out of the water changed into our clothes and handed our wet swimming costumes to our visitors. Both Dreyfus and Hilton changed into our swimming costumes and looked quite ridiculous, which made everyone laugh. Dreyfus was particularly amusing, for he had great difficulty keeping on the swimming suit, which was too large for him. It was a miracle that he didn't loose [sic] it in the water.

This created an even more lighthearted atmosphere on this memorable trip. I don't know about Olga and Dreyfus, but somehow sharing my swimming costume with Sidney created a strange feeling of intimacy between the two of us. When everyone finished swimming and laughing, we had our picnic lunch, and drove back to Prague in the coach. It was a wonderful day and it showed that no barriers erected by the cold war rhetoric can stop friendship and love.

■ *Professor Gerta Vrbová-Hilton, MD, DSc. writes: "I was born in Slovakia and while I survived the Holocaust most of my family perished. I describe these events in my book Trust and Deceit, published in 2006. In 1945 I moved to Prague, finished my medical studies and became a scientist. In 1958 I escaped to England, became Professor of Neuroscience at UCL and continue to live in London."*



From left, BCSA essay competition joint second prize winner, Gerta Vrbová-Hilton, essay prize administrator Edward Peacock and first essay prize winner, Jitka Jenkins, at the BCSA annual dinner in London, on November 26