Krakow–Vermont connection

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One of the privileges we enjoy as members of the scientific community is interaction with many brilliant and versatile individuals. When I was a reviewer for the U.S. National Institutes of Health, I came to know and befriend Jacek Hawiger. We were both committed to extending the boundaries of science career opportunities both in the United States and around the world. At the time, I was heavily involved in the international science enterprise as a member of the Council of the International Society on Thrombosis and Hemostasis (ISTH).

Jacek, a Polish ex-patriot, maintained a strong relationship with the faculty of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. Jointly with the faculty, he organized a symposium that included Yale Nemerson from Mount Sinai Medical School and myself. The meeting was in Szczawnica - a mountain resort in the south of Poland, where we went by bus. We stopped for beverages (mostly beer) and continued towards the resort for scientific and social meetings. I particularly remember hiking in the mountains with several students and enjoying a picnic with fresh lamb seasoned with evergreens. Later, during the party, I came to know a number of faculty including Andrew Szczeklik and he introduced me to a number of his protégés. Andrew was clearly a champion for his students and he sought opportunities in the West to expand their scientific career and experience.

I received two gifts, an honorarium in Polish zlotys, together with a very nice leather bound bottle of vodka. The zlotys were donated to Solidarity; the vodka mysteriously disappeared while I was out of town (I suspected my four sons and their friends but never found out).

I traveled home via Krakow and Warsaw. On one occasion, I ate at a restaurant in Warsaw, which offered an extensive menu with numerous pictures of the dishes. After browsing the menu carefully, I was informed by the waiter that my choice was "not available today" and neither the five other selections. Finally, I asked the waiter what was available today and he said "chicken".

When in Poland, I also had limited experience with respect to the oppressive nature of the Iron Curtain and the Soviet domination of the country.

At the Warsaw airport, my passport and travel documents were investigated by the guards. Those exiting were exposed to a circuitous path that did not permit a visual sighting of what was ahead. Upon arriving at the desk, I was scrutenized by a uniformed individual who evaluated my passport and visa stopping from time to time to look at me and at my papers. This minor encounter with the political system existing at that time was surely intimidating.

Andrew and I engaged subsequently scientifically through one of his protégés, Anetta Undas. Anetta came to the United States supported by a Fullbright foundation fellowship and began working on homocysteine modifications of factor V. Homocysteine is associated with thrombotic disease. The results of Anetta's studies, while a fellow in my laboratory, showed the incorporation of homocysteine into factor V. This chemical modification inhibited the subsequent inactivation of the product factor Va by activated protein C, a major regulatory element of the coagulation system suggesting a rationale for the homocysteine-thrombin connection.¹ Subsequently, upon Anetta's return to Krakow, my laboratory assisted the Szczeklik laboratory in the studies of blood coagulation and fibrinolytic products in the blood exuding from microvascular wounds produced in the forearm of volunteers. These studies initially were directed to the use of statin drugs. The resulting paper² was the first to show that in addition to cholesterol-lowering effects of statins, these drugs produced a direct anticoagulant effect by suppressing thrombin generation and enhanced protein C activation. Subsequent studies using the same model systems showed anticoagulant effects associated with low--dose aspirin.³⁻⁵ This highly visible research was highlighted by dealing with statin drugs and aspirin in blood coagulation.^{6,7} The cooperation of Anetta Undas and Andrew Szczeklik resulted in 24 published papers.

Overall, the professional and social interactions initiated by Jacek Hawiger and Andrew Szczeklik established a firm bond between the program at the University of Vermont and the research program in thrombosis and hemostasis initially developed by Andrew and now by Anetta Undas and her colleagues at that institution.

My good friend and colleague, Desire Collen, was enormously successful in both the scientific and economic realms, as a result of

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FIGURE 26 Professor Szczeklik (speaking) and Professor Ryszard Gryglewski (in the middle) at the annual symposium organized by the Jagiellonian Medical Research Center, Krakow, early 1990s

the development of tissue plasminogen activator as a treatment for cardiovascular occlusions. Desire created a foundation that contributed resources to the ISTH to develop the "Reach the World" prize championed by Andrew and Jacek Hawiger. The resource, initially supported by the Collen Foundation, provided opportunities for investigators from economically disadvantaged parts of the world to attend the ISTH meetings and to be incorporated and to allow their incorporation into scientific fields associated with thrombosis and hemostasis. Andrew, by then a member, of the Council of ISTH took a major role in the development of this program.

Science has no national boundaries. However, intellectual contributors may be inhibited, but not suppressed, by economic and political oppression. The maintenance of Polish academic science foundations is illustrated by Andrew Szczeklik's efforts to support his protégés during the oppressive political environment in Soviet Poland maintained at the Jagiellonian University.

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