

12th ESM conference in Prague in 1991

A personal memory

During most ESM conferences held before 1990 it was stated with great regrets that the Society did not reach its desirable (pan)European dimensions. The reason was that colleagues from countries behind the Iron Curtain were only rarely seen at the ESM meetings. Since I regularly obtained the consent by Czechoslovak authorities to participate in ESM conferences – apparently in view of my membership in the Committee on Bacteriology and Immunology of the IUATLD and of my occasional consultancy to the WHO TB Programme as well - I was asked by ESM members for help in mobilizing so far silent mycobacteriologists from Eastern Europe to participate in ESM conferences and in its scientific programme as well. Holding one of coming ESM meetings in one of three Central European Capitals, such as Budapest-Prague-Vienna, seemed to be a good idea for achieving such a goal. However, after the death of Professor Istvan Szabo from the Koranyi Institute in Budapest and due to unfavourable conditions in Vienna, Prague remained the only candidate for planning one of the next ESM venues in Central Europe. Needless to say, Vienna had to wait for an ESM conference until 2000 and Budapest is still awaiting its chance.

The Prague ESM conference was held from the 1st to 4th July, 1991 at the Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education under the auspices of the Czechoslovak Society of Microbiology and of my maternal National Institute of Public Health. Its date has been marked by some symptoms of the not yet fully stabilized posttotalitarian Czech community. However, Vaclav Havel's popularity, Prague historical singularity and its scenic setting, advantageous foreign currency rating, favourable weather and friendly social events contributed to a successful outcome of the conference. The number of more than one hundred participants exceeded the capacity of the auditorium and the scientific programme witnessed the steady progress in mycobacteriological diagnostic methods and molecular biology techniques showed here their increasing role in understanding mycobacterial biology. Attending colleagues from former socialist countries and a great number of Czech and Slovak participants broadened the international extent of the Society.

Two of several anecdotal events accompanying the Prague conference are worthy of mention. First, a few days before the meeting we were informed by the executive housekeeper of the Postgraduate Education Institute that a closure of the hot water supply was imminent owing to a periodic inspection of water pipings in the surrounding city quarter. We were horrified by imagining that participants would be exposed to icy showers right after reaching Prague and during the entire conference as well. Fortunately, my junior assistant sent to the water plant headquarters succeeded in reversing this threatening event. The chief manager introduced her to regional inspectors assembled just as to outline the water-piping checking and she was eloquent enough to salvage the hot water supply to the registered European mycobacteriologists.

Another story illustrates the everlasting problem of individuals being not able to involve in programmed topics and remaining mentally isolated from all the rest of participants. In our case, three colleagues – one woman and two men – were apparently absorbed in their common personal and business problems in the course of the entire conference and did not show any care about the world round. When we were returning from the gala luncheon at the castle Hruba Skala in the Bohemian

Paradise they failed to board one of our buses and, by mistake, they entered another bus awaiting a group of visitors still viewing the castle's chambers. Our introverts did not attract attention of their fellow travellers and after all, they were taken to a recreation area some fifty kilometres distant from Prague. It was the place where an international conference on metal welding was in progress and our colleagues happened to attend its closing ceremony without knowing the business topics and anyone of conference participants. They joined with pleasure mutton barbecuing and other merry-makings until the weary metal welders were dispersing to a nearby motel guest rooms. In the end, by courtesy of conference organizers, they were safely transported to Prague so that they could spend the rest of their long day at the Postgraduate Institute equally as they fellow mycobacteriologists.

Similar events illustrate another facet of any sociable happening and gradually fade away from the minds of those involved. Nevertheless, the Prague conference signified a milestone in the history of the ESM being the first one held in a former socialist country and, on the other hand, it opened to Czech and Slovak mycobacteriologists an international platform for presenting results of their research and diagnostic work. A great number of us participated in the successive 13th ESM conference in Regensburg, Germany in 1992 and steady attendance of Czech mycobacteriologists at following meetings continues up to the present days.

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