

Two Endocrinological Anniversaries

Svačina Š., Sucharda P.

Third Medical Department – Clinical Department of Endocrinology and Metabolism of the First Faculty of Medicine, Charles University in Prague, and General Teaching Hospital, Czech Republic

Received October 11, 2004, Accepted October 29, 2004

Summary: In 2004, the First Faculty of Medicine will commemorate two significant anniversaries related to the small, yet important field of endocrinology. On January 31, 2004 it has been twenty years since the death of the founder of the discipline in this country, professor Josef Charvát (*6. 8. 1897 – † 31. 1. 1984). The occasion was marked by the Dean of the First Faculty of Medicine, by the Pro-rector of Charles University and by the President of the Czech Academy of Science who jointly unveiled a memorial plaque dedicated to the founder of Czech endocrinology placed on at the house in Ostrovní Street, where professor Charvát lived and died. During the brief ceremony, short quotes were read from the works of professor Charvát by the famous Czech actor Radovan Lukavský and a speech was delivered by professor Vratislav Schreiber, the most notable of professor Charvát's students. On June 29, 2004, professor Schreiber himself, still full of vigour celebrated his 80th birthday. That day, too, is a significant anniversary in the history of Czech endocrinology.

Mailing address: Prof. Štěpán Svačina, MD., DSc., MBA, Third Medical Department of the First Faculty of Medicine and General Teaching Hospital, U Nemocnice 1, 128 08 Prague 2, Czech Republic, Phone +420 224 912 922, e-mail: stepan.svacina@lf1.cuni.cz

Professor Charvát, M.D., was born in Prague and graduated from the Medical Faculty of Charles University. There are few personalities in the modern Czech medical profession who had been able to excel in their scientific and clinical work done for the benefit of their patients, while enjoying at the same time the status of recognised authorities with respected views on health care and social issues. Professor Josef Charvát had been considered an excellent clinician and organiser ever since the 1920s, and is the unchallenged founder of the scientific discipline of endocrinology in our country. The force of his personality has become evident with the passage of time as one capable of not only recognising, but also promoting branches of science not favoured by the authorities of the day: genetics, cybernetics, immunology and, especially, the ethical and philosophical dimensions of medicine.

Although originally planning to specialise in psychiatry, Dr. Charvát started working in 1923, soon after his graduation, at the 2nd Clinic of Internal Medicine, headed by professor Pelnář, where he remained until the war. Besides devoting himself to treating diseases of the internal secretion glands, he also systematically dealt with other medical issues, e.g. nutrition. In 1948, he became professor of Charles University. In May 1945, he founded the Third Clinic of Internal Medicine of the First Faculty of Medicine, which he headed until 1970. He was active at the



*Figure 1 – Professor Josef Charvát, MD.
(* 6. 8. 1897 – † 31. 1. 1984).*

clinic until 1981. In 1969, he was elected Rector of Charles University but before assuming office he was forced to resign. His name was also proposed for the office of the President of the Republic. The scope of medical and social issues in which professor Charvát was involved is amazing. Besides his beloved endocrinology, which he always perceived in the context of internal medicine as a whole, he was very much interested in, especially, cybernetics and the medical application of computer technology, for which he laid the foundations at a time when it was a very remote vision from the point of view of everyday life.

Professor Charvát was a very social person. He was an active lifelong member of the Scouts, and – which, of course, is a less known fact – of the Prague Masonic Lodge. His broad knowledge allowed him to bestow a legacy of not only medical, but also philosophical works, including *Člověk a jeho svět* (Man and His World) and *Život, adaptace a stres* (Life, Adaptation and Stress), titles that belong to the professor's most valuable legacy.

There are not many individuals in the history of the Czech medical profession who would both rank amongst the founders of a discipline in which they excelled, and also achieve world renown.

Professor Schreiber is, no doubt, such a person. Unlike his great mentor, the pioneer of Czech and Czechoslovak endocrinology, professor Josef Charvát, he achieved fame, especially, as a discoverer endocrinologist. His discovery of the hypothalamic factor stimulating TSH secretion would, under different circumstances, certainly merit the Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology. In fact, he worked in the extremely difficult conditions of the communist regime without ever subjecting himself to compromise.

Professor Vratislav Schreiber, MD., was born in Prague on June 29, 1924. He started reading medicine at Charles University in 1945 and immediately approached professor Josef Charvát, with whom he shared an active interest in the Scouts movement. Professor Charvát recommended the bright young medical student to professor Vilém Laufberger, head of the Physiological Institute, to enable him to acquire skills in basic research, which professor Charvát planned to carry out also at the 3rd Clinic of Internal Medicine. At the Physiological Institute, Vratislav Schreiber received training in neurophysiology and wrote his first scientific works – during his medical studies he wrote 15 scientific communications, three of which were published in important scientific journals including *Nature*.

After his graduation in 1950, Vratislav Schreiber, M.D., was conscripted into the army – originally for two years of mandatory service, but, at the time of the Korean War, was forced to serve an additional three years. He did, nonetheless, manage to do scientific work at this time and – together with Olga, who later became his wife – published, in 1954, a basic monograph, *Základy pokusné endokrinologie* (Basics of Experimental Endocrinology).

At last, in 1955, he started his houseman ship at the 3rd Clinic of Internal Medicine, a year later defended his post-graduate dissertation, and two years after that was posted as research officer at the Laboratory for Endocrinology and Metabolism, also headed by professor Charvát. Now, forty-seven years later, he is still active at the Laboratory, albeit on a part-time basis. In 1963, he became an associate professor, and in 1968 was appointed first professor of clinical physiology in this country.

At the Laboratory for Endocrinology and Metabolism, professor Schreiber devoted himself to experimental endocrinology, especially neuroendocrinology. He studied the cerebral regulation of pituitary activity. He also studied the influence of the hypothalamus on the function of the hypophysis and in 1960 established evidence of the existence of a specific hypothalamic factor governing the secretion of hypophyseal thyreotropin, later referred to as TRH. This was an extraordinarily significant discovery of global importance! Professor Schreiber became an internationally renowned endocrinologist, as documented by the inclusion of his life-story amongst the *Pioneers in Neuroendocrinology* (Plenum Press 1977). His fame spread also after the English-language publication of another monograph, *Hypothalamo-hypophyseal System*. The second important discovery made by Schreiber was the discovery of an endogenous, digitalis-like activity of the blood serum, of which, together with his colleagues, he found evidence in adrenal



Figure 2 – Professor Vratislav Schreiber, MD.
(* 29. 6. 1924)

extracts (1981). He also participated in the discovery of the effect of nitric oxide in endocrine reactions, especially in the regulation of the adenohipophyseal function, in studies of the effect of estrogens on the hypophysis, studies of the role of ceruloplasmin and ascorbic acid in the hypophysis, in research of the effect of dopaminergic agonists on the hypophysis, etc. Thanks to his initiative, the Laboratory for Endocrinology and Metabolism started studying the fat tissue hormone leptine soon after its discovery in 1994. His experimental work resulted in 7 monographs, 463 original articles journals, and nine chapters in monographs by groups of authors and many chapters in textbooks.

Although circumstances did not allow professor Schreiber to reach the highest goals, his work has received two State Awards, two awards of the Czechoslovak Endocrinological Society, honorary membership of the Endocrinological Society and the Czechoslovak J. E. Purkyně Medical Society, the Purkyně Medal and many other awards. These have been joined recently by the 'Premium Bohemiae' award from the *Českému ráji* foundation of B. J. Horáček (2002) and, especially, by the State Award for Extraordinary Merit, 2nd degree, presented by the President of the Republic in 2003. It will not surprise that he is a founding member of the *Učené společnosti České republiky* (Erudite Society of the Czech Republic) and also a founding member of the Czech Medical Academy.

The indisputable merits of professor Schreiber as a scientist are enhanced by his rare ability to popularise science – suffice to remember his book *Medicína na přelomu tisíciletí* (Medicine at the Turn of the Millennium) and most recently *Hormony a lidská mysl* (Hormones and the Human Mind). No less important are his translation activities – he translated, *inter alia*, seven specialised monographs – and, especially, his skills as a speaker; he has always been a much sought after, and frequently awesome, debater. And yet, professor Schreiber never spoilt any fun, neither at the clinic nor at the Laboratory for Endocrinology and Metabolism. Now in his eighties, the Professor still goes regularly to his laboratory, he still sees outpatients and, fairly said, the last couple of years he has been looking more spry than ever. We do not know how he does it, but we wish him the same zest for life for many more years to come!

The personality of professor Charvát is remembered also in the two following remarks that appear here for the first time:

Professor Charvát – initiator of my own achievements in the medical profession

By Emeritus Prof. Zdeněk Dienstbier, M.D., DSc.

Chief Physician of the Institute of Biophysics and Nuclear Medicine

I graduated in 1950 and am one of those doctors who started their studies in 1945, in the so-called *Lucerna* semester. After graduation, I started my

housemanship at the 1st Clinic of Internal Medicine, headed by assoc. professor Josef Libáňský, a haematologist. I was then advised, in 1951, by elder friends at the clinic to apply for research assistantship to avoid two years of mandatory military service.

In 1954, I became assistant researcher at the 1st Clinic of Internal Medicine, studying experimental biological effects of radiation. In 1957, I was asked by the Dean of the Faculty, assoc. professor Tomáš Trávníček, to become the head of the Institute of Medical Physics.

I was 31 years old. I sought the advice of some of the faculty professors, heads of institutes and clinics. The most convincing arguments for switching to a theoretical career were presented by professor Charvát. Our discussion was, from my point of view, amazingly frank and helpful, although he hailed from the “Thomayer” school, while I was a “Meixnerian”. He confirmed Trávníček’s view that I had been given a life opportunity if we managed to turn medical physics into a discipline of medicine. He did not offer support directly, but he did provide it. Besides my friend and mentor, assistant František Heřmanský, professor Charvát was the person who encouraged me first into writing my doctoral dissertation and then in achieving a higher doctorate. He called me “Zdenečku”, in the diminutive, and often, in a mildly ironic tone, would share his private stories and decisions with me.

After he stopped smoking, he would always point to the open pack of Chesterfields in the top drawer of his desk when I visited: “I’ve got them there to exercise my strong will not to smoke”, he would say.

When he resigned as head of the clinic and continued as the director of the research laboratory he started having some difficulty in walking and would let his colleagues drive him to the clinic. “It’s a tragedy, Zdenečku, I am rotting from the feet upwards”, he remarked. At the age of eighty, he offered that we address one another with the more familiar “ty” rather than “vy”. I thanked him and explained I did not deserve such privilege.

He was the mover of the proposal for the State Award, which we received together with assoc. professor Jiří Šonka, and assoc. professor Miroslav Arient, the head of the Central Laboratories of the Central Military Hospital (ÚVN) in 1967.

In 1968, after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, I, as Pro-rector of Charles University, discussed with professor Charvát his candidature for the office of University Rector. In a letter included in the anthology published on the occasion of professor Charvát’s twentieth death anniversary, titled *To byl profesor Josef Charvát* (This Was Professor Josef Charvát), he expressed his creed of resistance to the occupation and rejected any form of collaboration. At the same time, however, he was the only person with the moral strength, life experience and authority needed to lead the university at a time of crisis. That, too, is why the Husák government and Communist Party leadership absolutely refused to sanction his nomination.

Both his political and professional statements were to the point, frank and critical. His expert opinion of my doctoral dissertation inspired my later scientific work. He truly was a great scientist, clinician, internal specialist, philosopher and, especially, man of great integrity.

Although he never had been my direct superior, his example was one I always tried to follow. That is also what I wrote in my autobiography published in 2001, *Stálo za to žít* (Life Has Been Worth Living).

Together with an extraordinarily numerous team of specialists, professor Charvát founded a school of internal medicine. Both his pupils and the broad generation of his followers today represent a significant part of our medical profession elite.

Professor Josef Charvát Remembrance

By Prof. Alexander Schirger, MD., Consultant in Medicine, Division of Cardiovascular Diseases and Division of Hypertension, Mayo Medical College, Rochester, Minnesota, USA

Written in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the death of Academic Josef Charvát.

It was the summer of 1947. It was a time of great hope, the City of Prague itself reflecting in its manifold beauty and adorned with the blooming flowers and trees of its many parks, the atmosphere of hope and achieved peace, giving her, that is, the City, the true air of the heart of the centre of Europe. It was a time when the hope of the achieved peace prevailed and was not tarnished by our awareness of the juridical and not infrequently criminal transgressions in the newly-acquired territories of Western Bohemia, transgressions that were passed over by the silence of the government, ignored by the media, and glossed over by the silence of the head of the state, Dr. Beneš. Only a few voices at that time warned of serious consequences of breaking the law and of violations of human rights, Helena Koželuhová and Ferdinand Peroutka being the rare exceptions that come to the author's mind. It was a time when students returned to their books and studies, when their hopes and aspirations seemed to be corroborated by the George Marshall plan offered to both conquered and liberated Europe and at first enthusiastically accepted by the Czechoslovak government. It was during this time, the summer of 1947, that I had a chance to participate in a summer excursion of students of Charles University to Rome and had the privilege to participate in a private audience of the entire group with the then reigning pontiff Pius XII. I recall very well that one of my colleagues, who was a student at the faculty of law, when asked by Pius XII what she was studying, answered in French, "la justice". The Pope, I recalled, smiled and said in French, justice is not always the law. This proved to be prophetic for our country for the next 40 years. It was during our visit to Italy that we learned of the fact that the government had been called to Moscow for urgent consultations and promptly thereafter declined the previously accepted offer to participate in the Marshall

plans. Crushed in our hopes, we returned home and fully immersed ourselves in our studies. It was during the fall of 1947 that I started the clinical part of my medical school studies, and I was assigned to the Third Internal Medical Clinic, the Chair of which was Professor Josef Charvát. This proved to be a decisive moment in my life's journey. With fascination did I listen in the ever more smothering atmosphere of the country to the lectures by Professor Charvát, who had just returned from the United States of America after a several-month sejour there. In every lecture he shared with the students the basic fact but always enriching them by pertinent experiences from his North American journey. His lectures reinforced in me my long-term decision to study internal medicine and to hopefully return sometime to the United States where so many of the then current medical miracles seemed to have taken place. Later on in my studies I recall him telling us with excitement of the discovery of cortisone efforts of Dr. Kendall and Hench in this regard. Little did I realize that several years later it was going to be my privilege to meet Dr. Hench and his gracious wife personally during my residency training in internal medicine. I was able to secure an externship in Professor Charvát's clinic and was assigned to the ward by Dr. Soyka; and to this day I remember my first patient, who was a young woman about 20, a nurse who was suddenly afflicted by acute myelogenous leukemia. Professor Charvát inspired a great spirit of cooperation, gentleness, and mutual respect in his clinic, which extended down to the lowest medical student. An unforgettable experience was Christmas Eve afternoon grand rounds when he visited every patient then remaining hospitalized in his clinic, asked about their state of health, and wished them a good Christmas holiday. The fears that we were perceiving in the summer and the fall of 1947 unfortunately materialized fully in February of 1948 when through a carefully-staged sequence of events, aided by disunity in the political parties of the centre and of the right and the vacillation of President Beneš, the communist party of Czechoslovakia effectively took control of the government. Within a short period of time of several weeks, the country was enveloped in the part of the European continent, which Winston Churchill described as having been placed behind the iron curtain in his famous speech at Fulton, Missouri. The students of Charles University were almost the sole physically-detectable sign of descent and marched courageously to the castle hoping to receive some support from the President. They never reached there and were dispersed by the butt of police rifles chasing them down the narrow and yet so beautiful street of Malá Strana. I happened to be, at the time, at the American Embassy and was able to view this from the consulate window. Needless to say, we as students looked to our teachers and hoped to hear words of wisdom and encouragement. Unfortunately, in very few instances, such encouragement was forthcoming, probably because most people realized the futility of any such gestures. Little did we know that it was going to take 41 years for the banner of freedom to be picked up again by students of Charles

University and during the day of November 17 and 18 initiate what later became known as the Velvet Revolution marking the end of the communist rule. I sensed quite a bit of disappointment and perhaps experienced the sense of betrayal when shortly after the events of February 28 Professor Charvát returned to the classroom and indicated that it was time for students to return to their books and to reconcile themselves with a new social order. In retrospect, it was probably the only course to take and life experiences have not taught me yet that it may have been the price for him to pay to remain on the post where for many years he would be able to mitigate the evils of the communist system, to shelter many who were in known disagreement with the system, and to maintain contacts of Czechoslovak medicine with the western world.

In early 1959 I had the occasion to write to Professor Charvát and ask his professional assistance in treating my future wife, who was persona non grata to the system and yet he did so without hesitation and with kindness, courtesy, and beneficial results. This initiated our long-standing contact, first by correspondence and later by personal visit when my wife and I were visiting Prague on several occasions. I always found him a courteous, kind, and stimulating gentleman whom I first encountered while sitting on the classroom's benches of the Third Medical Faculty in the fall of 1947. He was clearly a model to students, a physician par excellence, and a leader of others always looking to my perception for their progress and encouraging their growth. By this I am sure he was deeply influenced by his extended experience of his trip to the United States, as well as by his natural gift of an inquiring mind, scholarly teacher, and compassionate physician. Of the entire group of my university professors who taught me during my undergraduate education, he clearly left the most lasting and deepest impression. His contribution to the medical progress and to the founding of a specific Czech school of endocrinology has been mentioned by others. What I believe was unique to him was his ability to build a team where all members had an equal opportunity and a chance to have a voice that will be heard. In this, his legacy, transcends and towers over his many and significant factual scientific medical contributions. The measure of his impact can best be characterized by the fact that throughout my postgraduate medical education and career, both in the United States and in international organizations, I almost instinctively compared colleagues, and especially teachers, to the person of my first teacher of internal medicine, Professor Josef Charvát.

References

- SVAČINA Š.: SUCHARDA P.: eds.: To byl profesor Charvát, sborník k 20. výročí úmrtí, (This Was Professor Charvát – anthology published on the occasion of professor Charvát's twentieth death anniversary), Praga, Galén, 2003.
- VRBOVÁ H.: Analýza literární pozůstalosti profesora Josefa Charváta (Analysis of Professor Joseph Charvát's Literary Inheritance). *Sborník lék.* 96/2: p. 147–155, 1995.