

## Obituary

### Professor Otakar Poupa, M.D., Ph.D.



*17 October 1916 – 28 June 1999*

Born in the hilly landscape of Eastern Bohemia on the 17th October 1916, his early interests oscillated between biology and plastic art. Following the family tradition, he started his medical studies at the Charles University in Prague in 1935. His interest in basic sciences led him to work in the Department of Physiology headed by Professor Vilém Laufberger, who discovered ferritin, the iron-containing protein. Still as a medical student, Poupa published his first paper dealing with the modification of the vascular effects of catecholamines by sexual hormones.

When the Charles University in Prague was closed during the German occupation (17th November, 1939) and research work was prohibited, he continued his work in endocrinology in a laboratory supported by the pharmaceutical industry. After Second World War, he returned to the Department of Physiology. He started experiments on the metabolic antagonism of structural analogues (antithyroid drugs) which led him to study their

interactions with nucleic acids (pyrimidine analogues). He performed similar investigations on histamine and its structural analogues. The results were published in two monographs and formed the basis of his postdoctoral thesis (1947). Soon thereafter he became Associate Professor of Physiology.

Unfortunately, after the communist coup d'etat in 1948, Professor Poupa was expelled from his university position and permitted only limited research facilities. During the political "thaw period", he was allowed to resume his academic position (1959) and, after 1961, became full Professor of Pathological Physiology at the Faculty of Pediatrics of the Charles University in Prague. There and in his laboratory at the Institute of Physiology, Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, he started his studies on the onto- and phylogenesis of the cardiac muscle for understanding the basis of fetal and neonatal cardiology. This area of cardiological research, attracted many young students and became a speciality of the "Prague School" of

developmental and comparative cardiology. These fruitful years (1959-1968) culminated during the "Prague Spring" in 1968, when Professor Poupa was elected Corresponding Member of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and honored by a State Prize for his basic studies in cardiology.

For a short period in his life, he was active in politics. As one of the four authors of the heretic „2000 Words Manifesto" (together with the macromolecular chemist O. Wichterle, cardiologist J. Brod and writer L. Vaculík), he emigrated after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and settled in Scandinavia. First in Sweden (Göteborg - A. Carlsten, B. Folkow) as Fellow of the Swedish Medical Research Council, in Denmark (Aarhus - K. Johannson) and in Norway (Bergen - K. Helle) as visiting professor. He found there favorable conditions for comparative cardiological studies and was able to continue his research on the hearts of rare and "unorthodox" vertebrates from which he tried to reconstruct the natural history of the heart. In 1976, on his 60th birthday, he was honored for his research in comparative cardiology by an Honorary Doctorate of the University of Göteborg.

Professor Poupa was also closely associated with the foundation of the International Study Group for Research of Cardiac Metabolism (later International

Society for Heart Research), the project initiated in Prague in 1964 during the International Congress of Cardiology (together with R. Bing and E. Bajusz). Professor Poupa obtained the honorary membership of this Society in 1976.

The "velvet revolution" in November 1989 allowed him to visit Czechoslovakia again. On the occasion of his 75th birthday he was awarded the highest scientific appreciation of his native country - the "J. E. Purkyně's Medal of Science and Humanity" and the "Golden Medal of the Masaryk University" in Brno. Despite his difficult life and scientific history, Professor Poupa published 260 scientific papers, 6 monographs and many essays dealing with cultural life. The best evidence of his scientific personality are, however, the many pupils experimental cardiologists working not only in the Czech Republic, but also in many European countries, as well as on the American continent.

Professor Poupa was a distinguished scientist and many generations of students will always acknowledge the debt they owe him. He will be remembered with gratitude by all who knew him.

B. Ošťádal