

Obituary

Peter Hahn



8. 11. 1923 - 28. 8. 2007

Peter Hahn was my very good friend. Permit me, therefore, to employ a subjective mode in commemorating his life and achievements.

We both began our university years among several thousands of students of medicine when Charles University resumed its activity in 1945. I encountered his name for the first time on pages of a student magazine where he criticized the propagation of ideologically deformed results of several soviet scientists. Later, results of our student experimental work were published incidentally in the same supplement of *Biologické Listy*, a journal of Czech physiologists, and the common concern in physiology brought us together. A lifelong friendship was founded. In 1950, after we accomplished our education at the Faculty of Medicine, Ivan Málek, at that time director of the Central Institute of Biology, offered me the responsibility for a program investigating

biological growth. No wonder that I immediately informed Peter, and together, we went through the subject, co-opted Jiří Martínek and decided to undertake the task under the condition that the process of growing will be studied in accordance with the tradition of Edward Babák's School of developmental physiology as a component function of individual development. In 1953, when we applied for engagement in the newly founded Institute of Physiology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, we were able to present results of experiments demonstrating qualitative transformations of functions during ontogeny of mammals. Before long, the legendary Konárovice experiments of influence of premature weaning on the functional development were carried out. For years, week by week, we undertook journeys to a farm producing laboratory rats distant more than 60 km from our Institute. Experiments brought many basic and

unexpected findings. Finally we agreed on “late consequences of early adaptation”. At the same time we found a way to compensate for very limited contacts with foreign scientists. We organized symposia and were able – thanks to outstanding correspondence run by Peter in excellent English – to bring many participants with experience in the field of science close to our aims. Peter participated in these conferences also as a simultaneous translator and proved his invaluable wit by introducing into the translations sometimes quite an ironical comment. In the dramatic year 1968, just when our work beautifully flourished, our republic was assaulted by allied troops commanded by the Soviet army. Peter, who participated actively in the Prague Spring, was forced to leave his country. It took 15 years before we met again. It was at a meeting of FASEB in Anaheim. He came from Canada, I from Kuwait. After the collapse of the iron curtain, Peter visited Prague frequently and we kept in touch exchanging letters or e-mails, especially when he checked the manuscript of my book. At Christmas 2006 he wrote that he would come to Prague in the spring. In July he postponed the date to autumn. On August 15 he let me know that he gave up the visit because he was hospitalized. Fourteen days later I obtained the sorrowful message. Peter left us all for ever.

He was born in Berlin. His parents, Arnold and Maria Hahn had their roots in the Jewish communities, German and Czech speaking respectively, in what is now the Czech Republic. In 1934 the family moved back to Prague, but once again keeping a step ahead of the Nazi tide, the family emigrated to London in 1938. In 1941, Peter started his university studies at Swansea. His studies were interrupted a year later, when he joined the Czechoslovak squadron of the RAF. He returned to Prague after the war, although most of his family made their home in Britain. In 1956 he was awarded the CSs degree (equivalent to the PhD in Western countries) and in 1965 the DSc degree of the Academy. His thesis was “Development of the Metabolism of Main Nutrients in Mammals” and was published as a Czech monograph. Together with his close collaborator Koldovský he published another monograph “Utilization of Nutrients during Postnatal Development” in Pergamon Press. This book received a very positive review by McCance in *Nature*. He maintained a long lasting cooperation with scientists of The Institute of Mother and Child (Prague) and it was extended later to Miami, USA, where his co-workers emigrated. He did pioneering work in what is now a major research area: the effect of early nutrition on

subsequent development and health. His work was internationally recognized and widely cited and, in 1966, he was invited to spend six months as a visiting scientist at Stanford University. When the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia forced yet a fourth emigration upon him in 1968, he received 18 invitations from universities around the world including institutions such as MIT and Oxford University. However, Canada offered the best chance of a peaceful, prosperous life for his family and therefore he accepted the position at the University of British Columbia and, as of October 5, 1968, Vancouver has been his and his family’s home. In 1969 Peter received a career scientist’s award from the Canadian Medical Council and he was appointed Head of the Centre of Developmental Nutrition, later enlarged to Centre of Developmental Medicine. He has continued work in the laboratory studying the relation between karnitin and atherosclerosis and on the effect of early nutritional experience on cholesterol metabolism. His pedagogical talent made him an outstanding course instructor and graduate supervisor. One of his greatest legacies is a large group of scientists who were trained in his laboratory and continued to advance the areas of research he helped to found. In 1990 he retired after refusing to reapply for an extension of his grant, since he considered that he might be taking away money from younger and abler investigators. In 1996 he obtained for his merits in biological science a Golden Medal of J. E. Purkyně from the Czech Academy of Sciences.

Peter Hahn was a fellow of The Royal Society of Canada, member of the Canadian and American Nutritional Societies, of the Society of Experimental Biology and Medicine, Canadian Society of Endocrinology, International Society of Child Development. In 1972 he was elected a fellow of the Royal College of Medicine (Canada).

Peter was a steadfast friend to many people, and a casual one to many more (as well as to dogs, cats, lemurs and other animals he met). He was a man of an insatiable curiosity, disdaining convention and despising pretence. His humor could bite, his social informality could offend; but he was one of the kindest, gentlest people to walk this earth.

The importance of the work Peter left behind will very probably blossom and will find many successors. From time to time I am going to listen to César Franck’s *Symphony in D minor* from a record Peter gave me at one time.