

Vladimir Prelog: *Moja 132 semestra studija kemije*

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The idea of Dr. Jeffrey I. Seeman, former Chair of the Division of the History of Chemistry at the American Chemical Society, to animate and convince leading chemists, most of them Nobel laureates, to write their autobiographic memoirs was a great editorial success. The first out of 22 issues of his edition *Profiles, Pathways and Dreams* was published in 1990, and most others came out in the span of a bit more than 10 years. Among the outstanding chemists that accepted the invitation of Dr. J. I. Seeman was our Prof. Vladimir Prelog.

The Croatian translation of the autobiographic text of the Nobel laureate Prof. Vladimir Prelog represents highly welcomed editorial endeavour. All three editors and the translator should be congratulated on their perfect job. Much more than for mere correctness, admiration should be expressed to those who shaped the graphic presentation (Melina Mikulić and Studio grafičkih ideja), as well as to the printing house (Tipotisak). I personally prefer the graphic and editorial solutions of the Croatian edition over the first edition, published by the American Chemical Society in 1991.

Technically perfect and aesthetically appealing outline of this book attract the reader to immediately start reading the biographical notes of 'our Professor'. The best of his spirit, sense of humor, modesty, and discipline in presentation of chemical details make the reading of *132 Semesters* a great joy and aesthetic pleasure.

There are small details that nicely reflect the great care of Croatian editorial team. Firstly, the List of Photographs, which in the first edition appears almost at the very beginning, before such important chapters as Preface and Editor's Note, in the Croatian edition is more properly moved to the final part of the book, along with the References and Index. Secondly, there is a chapter Memories on Funding 'Kaštel' Research Laboratory in 1936 added to the Croatian translation. This chapter represents a valuable historical document for Croatian science. It is a reprinted article written by Prof. Prelog in 1986 for the booklet *50 Years of Scientific Research in PLIVA*. Many personalities and events mentioned in this article are known to the old generation of chemists, but the younger generations will meet most of these names for the first time.

The most precious part of the book consists of ten chapters, eight of which chronologically follow the Professor's life and scientific career: Childhood and Youth in Yugoslavia (1906–1924), Chemistry Student in Prague (1924–1929), Practicing Chemistry in Prague (1929–1934), University of Zagreb (1935–1941), Zurich Since 1942, Lectureship at the University of Notre Dame (1950), Full Professor at Zurich, Lectureship at Columbia University (1951), Revolution in Instrumentation and Other Developments (1950–1957), Head of Laboratory (1957), Collegial Chairmanship (1964), and Retirement (1976). The last two chapters, In Retrospect and Epilogue, though written in the same, so characteristically charming and picturesque Professor's style, took the role of the Summary and Prospective of a scientific paper. This detail, as well as many others in the chronologically ordered chapters, confirms scientific rigidity of our Professor whenever it is appropriate, whenever he felt that not obeying rigorous approach to the subject would harm the event, the person or the science.

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Zagreb 2007.

Already the titles of some chapters indicate the places and events of outstanding importance for Professor's career, as *e.g.* lectureships at Notre Dame and Columbia University, and his election as full professor at ETH, Zurich in 1952. In some chapters the reader will discover how strongly the Professor was attracted by, and how he admired many great chemists and great men he met in his long academic career.

In an attempt to support the above said, but avoiding any long lists of names, let me point out two characteristic 'stories' related to three great names.

Two long-lasting relationships were particularly important for Prof. Prelog; with Sir Robert Robinson and Prof. Robert Burns Woodward. These two famous Nobel laureates were the most famous organic chemists in the mid of the last century. Their mutual admiration and disputes became famous. Thus, on page 93, last paragraph, writes our Professor: 'Woodward and Sir Robert Robinson (please note the huge difference in presenting these two names! – V.Š.) held each other in high esteem, but they did not always get along well'. That this was true is more than obvious from the cited statement by Prof. Woodward in the same paragraph: 'You know, Sir Robert is a mean old man'. In support of this statement Prof. Woodward 'informed' our Professor about what Sir Robinson had said of him: 'Prelog is not a good chemist, but he is a good person'. Our Professor's reaction was in the form of the shortest comment 'How true!'. Such a reaction is so characteristic of our Professor, as it is of any great personality.

The second detail which merits presentation here is a long-lasting warm relationship of Prof. Prelog and Prof. Ružička. There was always a sincere gratitude and high respect present in the Professor's conduct with his teacher and generous supporter. However, Prof. Ružička was rather difficult and authoritative personality, which in their long-lasting relationship presumably required a lot of tactics on behalf of the Professor. The author of this text was surprised to hear the Professor asking Prof. Ružička in the library at ETH in 1969: 'Brauchen Sie mich noch Herr Professor?' (Do you need me any more, Professor?), after having helped him with some volumes of the journals from the higher shelves; at that time the Professor was 63 years old! In spite of this apparently formal relationship, our Professor decided to tell us less known, highly appealing aspects of Prof. Ružička's personality – his fascination with beautiful women. The story Ružička in Paris tells us how eager Prof. Ružička was to have in the lecture hall during his second lecturing in Paris Mme. Chevron, a very pretty lady who had attended his first lecture in Paris about 10 years before. To his suggestive question: 'Of course, you are staying for my lecture?', she answers: 'You know, Professor Ružička, your French has improved so much that it wouldn't be fun any more'. Ružička told me, the Professor informs us about this nice episode of their mutual confidence, that this was a great disappointment for him!

Of course, this review cannot be concluded without warmest suggestion to anybody who reads Croatian, or prefers to read in Croatian, chemist or not, educated in any scientific discipline or not, to have this book on the shelf and enjoy reading it.

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