

My Years with Professor Jiří Duchoň, MD., DSc.

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On July 27, 2007 emeritus Professor J. Duchoň reached the age of eighty. It is difficult to believe it because it seems that such a short period of time has passed since I wrote homage to his seventy fifth birthday. However, as my former teacher of pharmacology and later a charming companion in French expeditions Professor Max Wenke, MD., DSc., explained to me, with advancing age, time irreversibly flies quicker and quicker.

Biographical data of prof. Duchoň have been many times described in detail (see e.g. *Chemické listy* 91, 1997, 925–926; *Sborník lék.* 103, 2002, 153–155, *Křeslo pro Fausta, Galén* 2006, pp. 33–54, *Chemické listy* 101, 2007, 623–625). This time I would like to share some of my recollections with you because I had the privilege to see my PhD. supervisor, teacher, “boss” and later co-worker (may I dare to say so?) regularly for thirty five years (1961–1996) and afterwards from time to time for another eleven years up to now.

My first meetings with dr. Duchoň were associated with my post of lab assistant of the late Professor A. F. Richter and always followed the same script. Next to chemical experiments my duties included also washing up Professor Richter’s tea set. As there was no water in Professor Richter’s office, I had to use the sink in the adjacent office of dr. Duchoň. He used to welcome me with the statement “The main thing is: Do not splash water all over!”. My constant reply sounded “Those few drops or molecules will evaporate in practice immediately” and was echoed

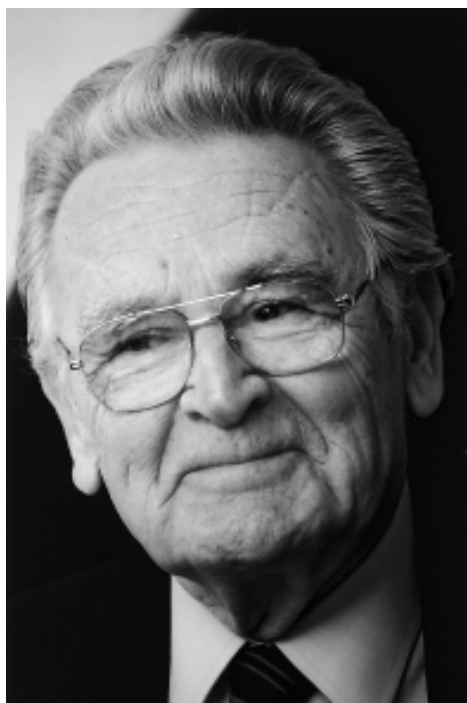


Figure 1 – Every time smiling
Professor Jiří Duchoň, MD., DSc.

by a louder voice “Do you know, what is the Avogadro’s number?”. (Explanation for non-specialists: Avogadro’s number defines e.g. that there are 6.02×10^{23} molecules in 18 g of water.)

Professor Duchoň has been an excellent teacher. His personal credo reflected ideas of his favourite Karel Čapek: “Love for the taught discipline must radiate from the pedagogue, the teacher should impart all the knowledge that is his/her own, this is the best way to attract students’ interest.” His lectures were clear and easy to follow. They were impressive and permeated with personal recollections of famous men of science. They were of notable contrast to those of some of his predecessors who read pages cut from textbooks. Professor Duchoň did his best to teach students even at the final exam: If the candidate was too laconic, prof Duchoň explained the topic in a desperate effort to convince him/her about the beauties and significance of biochemistry at least at the last moment. Many students admired him both as a teacher and man. My godfather, Pharm. Dr. Jiří Bergauer, an apothecary in Písek, told me several times how his daughter, a niece of the late Professor Vladimír Bergauer, a biologist from our faculty, was impressed by her first lecture in medical chemistry: Instead of a stiff, stodgy pedagogue, a suntanned man all in white turned up, jumped over the teacher’s desk and declared: “My name is Duchoň and I am going to teach you medical chemistry”.

The research activities of Professor Duchoň and his team have also already been characterised (e.g. *Sborník lék. 100, 1999, 13–25; Cell. Mol. Biol. 45, 1999, 883–892*). When I became a PhD. student of assoc. Professor Duchoň in 1966, he had already published papers in *Nature* (1962, 976) and in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* (100, 1963, 1048–1068), which brought him the Eleanor Roosevelt Fellowship from UICC and WHO and a long-term stay at the Harvard Medical School. I believe that there was no other teacher at our faculty with two papers in such prestigious journals at that time, but I must confess we did not pay attention to it. Rather we were more impressed by his rich collection of scientific reprints which was open to us – an exciting reading and a basis for subsequent long-term inspiring scientific discussions extending to late hours. In the nineteen seventies and eighties conditions for scientific research were not favourable (foreign reagents had to be planned for a year in advance and only in a limited amount; due to the shortage of instruments, self-made tools and apparatuses were widely used and frequent visits to other institutes to analyze samples were necessary. There was neither Internet nor personal computers. Research material was often smuggled – e.g. we could study an internationally recognised standard animal tumour model – B16 melanoma thanks to the help of dr. Z. Zbytniewski from Medical Academy, Gdansk, who brought us B16 melanoma-bearing mice in his pocket by train. In spite of these conditions, ten PhD. theses and three habilitation theses were prepared under the supervision of Professor Duchoň. I would also like to stress an almost forgotten fact: In 1981 from the initiative and

under the guidance of Professor Duchoň we organized the 3rd European Workshop on Melanin Pigmentation. At this meeting for the first time scientists from both sides of the Iron Curtain assembled together on a large scale and mutual cooperation between various laboratories was agreed upon and has proliferated from then up to now. We can say that in the field of pigment cell research the iron curtain was strongly eroded in Prague in 1981. In subsequent years at annual meetings of the European Society or Pigment Cell Research three men dominated in discussions: Professor Duchoň (Prague), Professor Prota (Naples), Professor Rorsman (Lund), whereas Professor Riley (London) acted as an arbiter, if necessary.

When Professor Duchoň retired in 1996, he received a personal letter from the dean assoc. Professor Petr Hach MD., PhD. with recognition of his long-time work for the 1st Faculty of Medicine and with a wish and hope that Professor Duchoň would continue in his research activities at his former department. However, to a surprise of many of us, unlike his classmates and contemporaries he was the only teacher who was not offered a part time job. He transferred his activities, therefore, to the Nomenclature Commission of the Czech Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, to the National Committee of Biochemistry and to the Learned Society of Professor J. V. Košťál. In 2000 he became professor emeritus of the Charles University. Only in 2001 he was appointed as a member of the Scientific Council of the First Faculty of Medicine and since that time he has been able to participate in and to enjoy the university life again. In 2005 Professor Duchoň was elected a member of the Czech Medical Academy.

Professor Duchoň has not changed much since his retirement. He is full of energy, eager to absorb new ideas from biochemistry and interested in what is new in the papers of his disciples. He is a brilliant speaker with broad opinion both in natural sciences and culture, an expert in Latin, Greek and classic proverbs and quotations (an excellent illustration of this can be found in his interview in the *Křeslo pro Fausta* (Chair for Faust) /mentioned above/. He is every inch a gentleman.

We wish our distinguished octogenarian good health, much success and plenty of pleasure both in his professional course and his family life (in 2007 he was promoted to the post of great-grandfather) and look forward to future meetings with him.