

SOME INCIDENTS AS A FULBRIGHT PROFESSOR

It was in May 1958, well into José's Fulbright year at Carlsberg Research Laboratory in Copenhagen, that Professor Lindstrom-Lang, Head of the Laboratory, approached him to discuss the Bergmann Rearrangement. This procedure (moving from a peptide-bond to an ester-bond of the serine part of a molecule) had long fascinated many investigators. José agreed to synthesize polyserine, a polymer that would determine whether this rearrangement was actually real or just an artifact occurring because of the reagents used.

Actually this polymer had been prepared a few years earlier at the Weitzman Institute in Rehovot, Israel by DeCordoba, Kachalsky, and others. Phosgene (a very dangerous poison gas) was one of the reagents used in its synthesis. José, in deciding to prepare the polymer at the Carlsberg Laboratory, requested phosgene to start his work. Dr. Martin Otteson, second in command at the laboratory, informed him that obtaining phosgene would be no problem; he had friends at Chemical Warfare in the Danish Army who could supply it for them. Approximately one week later, a cylinder of the poisonous gas arrived. It was labeled "Made in 1918".

José tried several times to synthesize the polymer using this material, but after five unsuccessful attempts in which much serine (a rather expensive material) was wasted, he concluded that, in all probability, the fault lay in the fact that the phosgene had decomposed. Unfortunately, Carlsberg Laboratory had no facility to purify or make fresh phosgene. He discussed the problem with Professor Lindstrom-Lang, who suggested that José go to Israel and make it there, because scientists at the Weitzman Institute had already had experience in preparing phosgene.

Through the good offices of the American Embassy in Copenhagen and Mrs. Karen Fennow (Local Head of the Fulbright Program), they secured funding and arranged for his travel, with the understanding that José would give several lectures while in Israel to justify his trip. At the last moment, Mrs. Fennow informed him that several research laboratories in Spain would also like for him to present some of his research there, speaking in Spanish. It was decided that after finishing his work in Israel, he would fly from there to Madrid before returning to Copenhagen.

He left for Israel, happening to arrive in time for that country's thirteenth-year celebration, which he witnessed personally in Jerusalem. The country was commemorating its *bar mitzvah*, its symbolic achievement of adulthood. Parades were going on everywhere, banners were on display and, from his hotel room, José was able to see, in the distance, pockets of lone Israeli settlements surrounded by areas flying Jordanian flags.

At the laboratories in Rehovot he was warmly welcomed, and they extended help with his project. By the end of two weeks, the work was successfully completed. Several grams of different molecular weight polymers of serine were synthesized, the molecular weight of each being determined.

It now came time for him to leave. His ticket and other paperwork needed for the trip to Spain arrived. He was set to fly out from Ben Gurion Airport in Israel to Madrid, with a stop in Rome. On the day of departure, José and his luggage were taken aboard a TWA plane. Every seat was occupied. The plane pulled out of its pier and began to taxi in preparation for take-off. Suddenly and without warning, it came to a grinding halt. Three jeeps carrying several people approached the plane on the tarmac. The door of the plane opened, and a TWA official in uniform boarded. Reading from a list, he called out seven names, José's among them.

"These passengers are requested to leave the plane," he announced.

Their baggage was then taken out, placed on the tarmac, and the seven passengers picked up their bags and stood waiting. Finally a bus arrived to return them to the airport.

While this was going on, two large limousines rolled up the tarmac, stopping close by. Seven new passengers got out and boarded the plane. (Weeks later, José would find out that they included Sara Churchill—Sir Winston's daughter—and her party.) The plane then took off, leaving José and the six other passengers behind.

Hours later they were directed to board a BOAC British plane that would be headed for Madrid. This plane, however, would be making stops in Nicosia (Cyprus) and in Rome before reaching Madrid. The group wearily got on board, glad at last to be on their way. A short time after take-off — it was actually when they were approaching Cyprus — that José was startled to suddenly notice the black rubber gasket around the outside of his plane window beginning to come loose. Quietly he pushed the button for the attendant, then pointed out to her what was happening. A few minutes later, the flight captain arrived. He examined the window, then suggested in a low voice that José move to another seat "just in case".

"We'll be descending to Nicosia in just a few minutes," he stated. "Please do not make a fuss. We don't want to upset the other passengers."

The plane finally landed without further incident. Upon getting off the plane, they were informed that fighting had broken out between Turks and Greeks in the area near the airport. For the protection of everyone, they would be taken to a British safety zone. This turned out to be a jail inside a fortified perimeter. Here they were all left to spend the night.

Next morning the authorities felt that it was safe for the passengers to be transported back to the airport. Here they boarded the plane for Rome. After a short stop at that city, they were transferred to a new plane headed for Madrid. José finally arrived there thirty-six hours late.

A group was waiting for José at the airport. (One of the members carried a sign with the word “Rabinowitz” marked on it.) They welcomed him warmly, although one man who turned out to be chairman of the upcoming meeting let José know that he was displeased and scolded him for arriving late (as though the whole delay was José’s fault). He let José know that it was with great difficulty that he had finally been able to reschedule the conference, as well as the television recording that would be going on there. Then he announced that José had less than an hour to appear at San Carlos Lecture Hall to present his first lecture, which would be televised. Hurriedly José managed to obtain some food and locate his slides. Then they drove him to the hall, where over one hundred physicians and medical students were waiting to hear the latest about cholesterol .

On the way into the hall, a physician grabbed José by the arm and admonished him not to forget to tell the audience that eating garlic twice a day would lower cholesterol. Also, he insisted, José should be sure to mention his (the physician’s) name when he made his presentation to the audience. He added that he had names of several patients to prove his point. José had to physically extricate himself from the man’s grasp so he could reach the podium.

Then the conference began. José addressed the group in Spanish, and everything progressed satisfactorily for about twenty minutes. Suddenly a student began to call out questions, one after another. In Spanish, José responded, “Later! Later!” But this only served to provoke the young fellow into calling out even more.

At this point José decided to announce that he would give in and answer the questions in just another moment or two, after he had finished making his point. His exact statement included the Spanish word “ahorita”, a term which is commonly used in Mexico to mean “shortly”. Upon hearing this, the chairman banged on his gavel. Heatedly he began to shout, “This is Spain! Here we speak Castilian! No ‘Mexicanismos’!” while the television cameras continued to roll, recording the whole scene.

At the end of the session José, wanting in his capacity as Fulbright ambassador of good will, to mollify the chairman, approached him and privately apologized for having offended anyone by the use of a Mexican word. The man sniffed contemptuously, turned away, and the meeting ended.

After all of these incidents José, upon his return to Copenhagen, found Denmark and the Carlsberg Laboratory one of the most serene and idyllic spots he knew.