

## Ojārs Neilands: Some Little Adventures, 1975 – 2000.

### Riga

The first time I met Ojārs 47 years ago in 1975 happened when I was taking the entry exam to Riga Polytechnic Institute, Faculty of Chemistry. I should confess that I didn't appreciate that Ojārs was a really great big scientist, as I was concerned too much about replying the exam questions correctly, in addition, he was seated during the exam and didn't stand up. During the first year of my studentship I was fascinated by quantum chemistry of inorganic compounds and only in the third year decided that I needed some more real research in chemistry and arranged to meet the chairman of the Organic Chemistry Department.

It was during our second meeting when I appreciated Ojārs: this time he did stand up. Not only that, it turned out that *he was prepared* to our discussion pretty well and was able to explain in simple words the topic of my potential investigation, which was unusual. Moreover, he had appointed Jānis Lipšāns, a very nice guy, as my "micro-supervisor", which as I understood later on was a strike of a genius. Indeed, Jānis was very helpful, never ever opposed my suggestions and ideas. He was a sportsman and very soon moved to the Sport Department (Physical Culture). Thus, Jānis saved a hell of a lot of my time since having such a great connection I was able to miss many of the compulsory "physical culture" lessons without any bad consequences from the side of the Dean's Office. After I started working on my PhD five years later, my second impression of Ojārs has been confirmed by my 1.5-year old son. Seeing Ojārs, he contemplated for a couple of minutes watching straight up and pronounced his verdict: Ouuuu! Dyaadyaa!

One of the most prominent features of Ojārs was his being always thoroughly prepared to any situation. Once, together with my colleague Jānis Kacens (the late), we were designing a multi-step synthesis and needed phosgene to pass through a reaction mixture for several hours. We had mentioned that to Ojārs and he agreed that it was the only way, although he didn't look happy about that, and asked us to be cautious. With Jānis we perused all available literature on the topic, especially, the old German chemical journals where the process was described in details. In particular, we found that this poisonous gas with the weak hay smell is difficult to feel and it was highly recommended to smoke tobacco during its preparation and use as smoking increases the olfactory sensitivity to the smell of this compound several times. We had prepped two big cigars that should have sufficed for the time needed to complete the reaction. Assembling the setup took almost the whole day and in the late afternoon we started both the reaction and our cigars. About 6 p.m. we had a visitor. Ojārs came over, had a look at the reaction, asked us to be cautious and left. We continued to enjoy the cigars, but very soon the lab door was suddenly stormed by faculty dean, Comrade Imants Meirovics (the late). Imants raised a sort of a scandal insisting that smoking was strictly forbidden in labs, didn't listen to our explanations and left slamming the door. He was so excited that he forgot to call us 'colleagues' as he always used to do when talking to everybody

including the cleaning ladies. It was my second and last personal encounter with Comrade Meirovics and certainly not so fateful as the first one (see at the end of these notes). Jānis and I agreed that this time we were lucky to avoid the 'colleagues' label as from Imants it sounded quite offensive and relit our cigars. Several years later I reminded Ojārs of this story and he admitted that he had also perused all information on phosgene, found out the mentions on the smoking effect but didn't warn us as he knew that both of us were smokers and had perused all the literature as well. I know only of two cases when he was caught unawares, about these, I will relate later.

Ojārs was also well prepared to my leaving to Israel in 1990. We had a long discussion and decided to be in touch and keep the collaboration. He visited us twice in Israel and once in France during my sabbatical leave in Angers.

## **Israel**

During Ojārs visits to Israel, he was invited to deliver a series of seminars on charge transfer complexes at Ben Gurion University, Beer Sheva. Lecturing in Israel is not a trivial job, as students there are not used to wait till the end of the lecture to ask questions. If something is not clear, they are not shy of interrupting the lecturer and asking their questions straight away. This tradition has many advantages, but is very demanding to the readiness of lecturers. Since preparedness of Ojārs, as one can see from these short notes, was one of his prominent features, his lectures in English were perfect and proceeded without a glitch. Ojārs even learned Hebrew alphabet and managed to read the road signs while I was driving him from the airport to Beer Sheva. Reading Hebrew is very complicated, as only the consonants are written and most of the vowels are omitted, especially those following the mute end H. Moreover, the consonants B and V are denoted by the same letter and Ojārs was very confused by his only mistake while reading 'YBNH' (Yavne, a biblical place famous now by the production of select garlic pickles, highly appreciated later by Ojārs). My explanation that it wasn't his fault and was just the result of his good command of short Russian expressions and a usual error of Russian speakers has not served as good consolation.

Another funny accident occurred during Ojārs first day at the university and was related to recent technology developments. Leaving my office for a short visit to the men's room at the end of the corridor, Ojārs returned later than expected with the mission unaccomplished. Someone was shouting at him in the apparently empty room at the decisive moments and we had to revisit that room together. It turned out that indeed there were loud and sharp exclamations in Hebrew interrupted by short periods of silence. Then, after a waterfall sound, a cabin door opened and a man with a huge cell phone at his ear appeared. It was a departmental professor in the middle of an angry dispute with the delivery department. Ojārs visit fitted apparently with the shouting/silence cycle. At the beginning of 90's, the cell phones were very rare and expensive...

During Ojārs stay in Israel we undertook several trips across the country, which he enjoyed aplenty. We have visited the Negev desert (Fig. 1), ancient copper mines, the northern

Israel close to the Lebanon border and the Dead Sea. Unfortunately, the last trip was not successful, to put it mildly. On the way to the Dead Sea we have discussed the specifics of it in detail: concentration of salt, density of water, etc., etc. Actually, it was my attempt to contribute to Ojārs's usual preparedness. The season was not for bathing, but the water was warm as usually (Fig. 2). On the shore, suddenly, Ojārs turned to the water line and started to run toward it gaining speed so that I had no time to say a word. In a second, he reached the knee depth and plunged into water with his hands up and face down as if he had intended to swim in Baltezers. In a fraction of another second he appeared over water with his hands and legs high above water, head and chest also above water and the rear part of the body half under the water surface. The Dead Sea, owing to the water density, is suitable for lying over water and reading a newspaper, but not for swimming. Apparently, Ojārs considered his final position on water as not suitable for a distinguished professor of chemistry, humiliating and insulting. In less than a minute after a short struggle he reappeared on the shore looking thoughtful and I didn't even dare to take a picture. Luckily, a whip to punish the sea wasn't available and we drove back to Beer Sheva in deaf silence. Fortunately, my wife took care of a dinner and we had a good supply of cold drinks in the fridge, which helped to discharge the situation.

### **France**

Our meeting in Angers, France, in 1999 was harmless from the swimming point of view, as the Atlantic shore at the latitude of Nantes was stormy, but fruitful from the chemistry point. Ojārs delivered a nice seminar talk, we traveled along the Loire river, visited Chateau de Saumur (Fig. 3, 4) and discussed several chemical and life issues with the help of wine from local vineyards and Old Virginia bourbon (Fig. 5). Our chemistry plans were mostly focused on the indandione chemistry and were so extended that even now, 23 years afterwards, we are still fighting with this puzzling compound in my current lab.

### **Riga**

During these years, I have visited Riga three times (the last time in 2000) and we were able to continue to talk over things (Fig. 6) with the generous help of Laima Neilande.

In conclusion, I would like to recognize the great contribution of the former Dean of Faculty of Chemistry Comrade Imants Meirovics who had approved during our first personal meeting (very probably by mistake) moving my scientific activities from the Department of Synthesis and Production of Bioactive Compounds to the Department of Organic Chemistry 43 years ago. It was not an obvious deal those times. Still, it had initiated my studies with Ojārs, our further collaboration and was of enormous influence on my curriculum vitae.

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## Attachments.



Fig. 1. Negev



Fig. 2. Dead Sea



Fig. 3. Chateau de Saumur



Fig. 4. Saumur.



Fig. 5. Angers.



Fig. 6. Riga.