

Few months in Leningrad at the Laboratory of Unicellular Organisms

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The author of the article is well-known Polish protistologist who worked in the laboratory of Prof. Poljansky as a young man in 1965. The note recalls his impressions of that time and about people which he met in Leningrad.

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In 1965 I spent few months in Sankt-Petersburg (then it was Leningrad) at the Laboratory of Unicellular Organisms of Yury Ivanovich Poljansky in the Institute of Cytology of the Academy of Science of USSR (INC AS USSR). At that time Institute appeared at the Maklin av. 32 in the stylish very beginning of XX century building, designed for reach people in pre-revolution Russia. The Laboratory of Unicellular Organisms occupied one spacious apartment in this building, however, it was short of space for the laboratory work and was not designed for this purpose. Unfortunately I have not any photos from my stay at the Maklin av. in INC. At that time I was working on opalinid protists, which appear to be quite distant from ciliates. I worked then with Dr. Cs.M. Sukhanova, who taught me some tricks about encystment and excystment of the protists, however, I stopped working with them many years ago. Thus, I did not worked directly with Jury Ivanovich.

During my stay in the Institute, the closest coworker of Yu.I. Poljansky was V.A. Sopina. They worked on conditioning of amoebas to elevated temperature which was similar to facilitation of *Tetrahymena* discovered later on by Roberts and Orias.

In 1965 memories of the war time and horrible siege of Leningrad were still present in human minds and usual talks of this time. It was also a time of Khrushchev and reviving of genetics in the USSR after all persecutions of scientists during the Stalin's period. Below are some my personal memories about Prof. Yu.I. Poljansky from my stay at the Institute in 1965.

1. Professor Yu.I. Poljansky was a handsome nice man, wearing formal grey suit. I remember small informal New Year celebration at the laboratory, when there was low temperature outside. Then Yury Ivanovich mentioned, that during the war time and siege of Leningrad there was also hard winter, but then he did not say anything about his service in army during the Leningrad siege (but he described them later in his autobiography published in 1997).

2. Three years after the war Yu.I. Poljansky was removed from his University post and sent to the Marine biological station at the Barents Sea. It was a kind of exile. The reason of this persecution was, that T.D. Lysenko mentioned in his famous speech in 1948, that Professor Yu.I. Poljansky referred to laws of genetics in his university lectures, while genetics in USSR



Fig. The main members of the Laboratory of Unicellular Organisms, INC AS USSR, Leningrad, the beginning of 1980s. From the left: T.V. Beier, Yu.I. Poljansky, I.B. Raikov, A.L. Yudin (from collection of S.I. Fokin)

become forbidden. After few years spent at the Barents See he was appointed as the head of a new Biological Institute in Petrozavodsk north of Sankt-Petersburg at the Onega Lake. After few more years he returned to Leningrad and was appointed for a chair of zoology in Biological Faculty of the Leningrad University and head of the Unicellulars Laboratory at the Cytological Institute. I never heard from him about all misfortunes and turns about of his life, which are unimaginable now.

I knew only, that Tamara Matvievna the older technician went with Yu.I. Poljansky from the Barents See station. It happened that one night I remained long hours in the laboratory and then I was talking with Dr. I.S. Irlina. She told me all about persecution of Professor Poljansky during the Stalinian period. She concluded that under other circumstances Prof. Yu.I. Poljansky would have achievements comparable with those of Tracy Sonneborn and finally she added two contradictory sentences: (i) "Do not repeat what I told you to other people" and (ii) "Consider carefully to whom you will repeat what I told you". She also said that genetics in Soviet country was treated severely.

3. During my stay in the Cytological Institute there were many lectures, seminars and discussions open to all people of the Institute. It happened that once there was a discussion about biology teaching and the main speaker was Prof. Yu.I. Poljansky. He was appointed then

as an expert by the Soviet Ministry of Education. The issue was a new textbook of biology for all Soviet secondary schools. It was a time when pseudo-scientists were still fighting against genetics and in favor of “lysenkoism”, it is in favor of heredity of the acquired traits (it was after Watson and Crick discoveries!). They apparently insisted with some success that genetics and “lysenkoism” should be taught as an equal scientific concepts. Yu.I. Poljansky told the audience, that Minister of Education was pressing for completing new textbook of biology teaching before beginning of a new school year. And then Yury Ivanovich said that “Biology in USSR was closed behind seven locks’ and whether it will be taught as before or will be not taught at all will make not a difference”.

4. Prof. Yu.I. Poljansky with Igor Borysovich Raikov have attended International Congress of Protozoology held in London in 1965. Dr. Raikov made many photos of participants of the Congress, whom he met for the first time, and was very excited about these meetings. He presented all his congress photos to all his coworkers and colleagues, as a special slides presentation. Then Yu.I. Poljansky made a comment: “You know they are friendly and usual people just as us”. This sentence was a testimony of isolation of Soviet scientists and other Soviet people by the cold war and iron curtain.