

Prostacyclin in Moscow

John Martin *

Department of Medicine, University College London, 5 University Street, London WC1E 6JF, UK

Online publish-ahead-of-print 4 December 2023

Keywords Prostacyclin • Moscow • Krakow

Your obituary for the vascular pharmacologist Ryszard Greglewski evoked memories of how I first met him. He had worked in the Wellcome Foundation Research Laboratories near London at the invitation of the Nobel Prize winner Sir John Vane. Deep in the cold war, he had managed to be granted a sabbatical by the Polish authorities to work with John Vane. During that time, he was involved in the discovery of prostacyclin which in part led to John Vane's Nobel prize. Ryszard then returned to the medical school in Krakow.

I was going to attend the World Heart Federation Congress in Moscow in August 1981, when Brezhnev was in charge of the Soviet Union. John Vane approached me, asking whether I would take a sample of the first manufactured prostacyclin with me to Moscow. He had not been able to contact Ryszard and sending it to Poland at that time was not possible. John Vane explained that if I could do that, it would allow Ryszard to initiate research on prostacyclin in Krakow. I said yes, having been told that Ryszard would surely be at the congress. I was told that all the communist block scientists would be staying at designated hotels.

At that time, I was in the British army reserve, so I had to inform the army that I was visiting a Warsaw Pact country. I was visited by a sergeant from the army's security branch to be briefed. I was told that every woman I met in Moscow would be in the KGB. As the sergeant left, he said 'and I must remind you, Sir, that it is an offence against military discipline to have sexual intercourse in the Soviet Union'. I thanked the sergeant for his comment.

So, I entered the Soviet Union with a vial of white powder, prostacyclin, in my shirt pocket. The search for Ryszard involved visiting several hotels in Moscow and asking the girls at the reception (KGB) whether Polish professors were staying there. Eventually, I found the right hotel, and after negotiation, I was told the number of Ryszard's room. I knocked on the door, which was opened by a big man with a strong jaw. 'Professor Greglewski?' I asked. After a pause: 'Yes'. 'I have brought something for you from John Vane' I said. Later, Ryszard told me that his first thought was 'The KGB are speaking very good English now'.

With great reluctance, he invited me into his room and we sat at a table. I produced the vial of prostacyclin from my shirt pocket but he wouldn't take it, so I put it on the table. He produced vodka for both of us, and we spoke first about science, then our histories. It emerged that we both had a Catholic background. He suddenly said to me 'Introibo ad altare dei'. I replied 'Ad deum qui laetificat iuventutem meum'. He sprung to his feet saying 'No KGB man would know the opening of the Latin mass!'. The bottle of vodka was replaced by a bottle of whisky, and we spent a couple of hours talking. He invited me to come to Krakow in December to give a lecture. We arranged a date.

I left radiant with comradeship towards Polish academia. I was late for a party at the British Embassy to which I hastened by taxi. On arriving at the magnificent building near the Kremlin, I discovered that I had left my passport in my hotel. The embassy was ringed by security forces to stop access. I identified the officer in charge, approached in confidence, and in the absence of a passport, produced my Nation Westminster Bank credit card with a flourish. The officer saluted and opened a way into the Embassy. I had discovered that the Soviet Union had weak points.

I had arranged to visit Krakow in December. My secretary came into my office saying, 'Marshal Law has just been declared in Poland'. I asked her to phone Professor Greglewski's office; she returned saying, that there was no telephone communication with Poland and British Airways said that flights were suspended except for a last one the following morning: 'I have to get on that flight as I have to give my talk'. After arriving in Warsaw on the last flight from London, I flew to Krakow on a plane with soldiers carrying batons standing in the aisle. One had to be accompanied to the toilet by a soldier and leave the door open. I arrived in Krakow airport and asked where I could make a phone call. 'There are no phones' I was told. 'So, where can I get a taxi?'. 'There are no taxis'. I started walking towards Krakow. After a while, I saw a car which was a small fiat. I waved and he stopped. I showed him Ryszard's address. He was reticent but said he would take me to the main square. There I stood in the square, deserted except for a line of tanks. I went up to the first tank and held up a piece of paper with Greglewski's address, asking for directions. After much hesitation, a soldier came down from the tank and took me to a road off the square where there was a taxi parked. The driver was reticent to take me, probably because I had arrived with a soldier, until I produced a £5 note.

For the second time, I found myself, unexpectedly knocking on Ryszard's door. His surprise was greater than in Moscow. I was treated with great hospitality. Later, I learned that Ryszard's wife had gone out to barter for a pork chop for my dinner, such were the shortages.

Marshal Law forbade the gathering of more than three people. At my lecture, there were about 300 cheering staff and students of the medical school, breaking the law in solidarity. The generosity of Polish academia engulfed me. There was no petrol but a collection was made of half litres producing sufficient fuel so I could go to Zakopane to see the Tatra mountains. Special travel documents had to be organized. I was the only visitor.

Thus, I started my love affair with Krakow and lifelong friendship with Ryszard and Andrew Szczekliki, Professor of Medicine, who later spent a year's sabbatical with me. Who knows where a vial of prostacyclin will take you?

Conflict of interest: none declared.* Corresponding author. Tel: +44 776 768 6326, E-mail: john.martin@ucl.ac.uk© The Author(s) 2023. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the European Society of Cardiology. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com

Przedruk artykułu za zgodą autora i redakcji. Artykuł poświęcony pamięci prof. Grylewskiego pierwotnie ukazał się w: John Martin, Prostacyclin in Moscow, Cardiovascular Research, Volume 120, Issue 1, January 2024, Page e1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cvr/cvad160>.