

Nostalgic roots

from Juraj Iványi, the founder of EFIS-Tatra Immunology conferences

While heading one of the departments of the Institute of Experimental Biology and Genetics (director Milan Hašek) in Prague, I was on holidays in Great Britain during the August 1968 Soviet Union's invasion; I did not return to Czechoslovakia until May 1990.

Then, while visiting regularly again, I met Jaroslav Šterzl, the Founder of the Czechoslovak Immunological Society (my PhD examiner), who invited me to give a lecture at the annual congress of the Czechoslovak Immunology society held in 1991 in Banská Bystrica, in the heart of Slovakia.

While driving through the mountains, it crossed my mind, that they would be suitable venue for conferences in the format of the 'Gordon Conferences' which take place in a natural setting, with lectures in the early morning and late afternoon, with time spent outdoors in midday/early afternoon. I enjoyed attending one of them in 1965, but my nostalgia was probably boosted also by nostalgia for the Tatra mountains where I used to go skying regularly as a teenager.

During the congress in Banská Bystrica, I approached Juraj Šváč, a local clinical immunologist, who was enthusiastic about my idea to initiate a "Gordon style" conference in the Tatra mountains and willing to act as the local organizer. At that time, serving as international secretary of the British Immunological Society (BSI) gave me the platform to act with the BSI authority. Next, I invited during 1992 as co-organizers firstly Georg Wick from Innsbruck and then Jaroslav Šterzl from Prague to involve the Austrian and Czechoslovak Immunology Societies. Though having 3 national immunological societies and a local organizer, one substantial 'detail' remained— funding for the event and the expenses of invited speakers. I turned to the president of the European Federation of Immunological Societies (EFIS), Klaus Eichmann, who supported the proposed project, and obtained approval of substantial funding by the EFIS Committee.

However, the path was not smooth: Firstly, the expected separation of Czechia and Slovakia (from January 1993) made me to hesitate as to whether to proceed, but when consulting Jaroslav Šterzl, he restored my confidence, advising me to continue as if nothing had happened. The second problem was the cancelling of reservation by the hotel 'Srdiečko' in Tále in the Low Tatras, being "gazumped" by some British travel agency. Fortunately, Juraj Šváč, with the help of his wife, quickly found another hotel: in Krpáčovo, also in the Low Tatras, where the first Tatra Immunology Conference was then held during 6 – 9 September 1994.

Under the title of 'Molecular determinants of T cell Immunity' the opening of the Conference by Avrion Mitchison produced some truly exciting moments for the international speakers and for participants who came mostly from Czechia and Austria. The venue at the foothills of Tatra mountains allowed participants to interact also outside the lecture room: during mid-day hiking and excursion breaks, involving walks on the mountain slopes rustic villages or castle ruins and later at night in an adjacent 'Shepard's Hut' bar, though distracted by live Slovakian folk dance music.

Juraj Šváč organized locally the conference with great dedication and played a huge role in its success, but sadly died before the next conference (1996), held in Jasná, also in the Low Tatras. At that stage I passed the role of the main organizer who selected the invited speakers to Georg Wick from Innsbruck.

The conference was upgraded to become one of the 'regular' meetings of EFIS since 1998. Vaclav Hořejší, became the organizer of the scientific program of the following eleven (!) conferences. He has been then the enthusiastic driving force, deserving the acclaim for what has been achieved by the conferences during the next 20 years (1998 to 2018). The conferences were held in the High Tatras, firstly in Tatranské Zruby, and then at the Patria Hotel in Štrbské Pleso. During that whole period, the financial support was organized by Hannes Stockinger from Vienna, while the local organizing being managed mostly by Stanislava Blažičková from Piešťany.

The 4-day scientific programs had sessions ranging from fundamental to clinical immunology. The participants with poster presentations have often been engaged into temperamental discussions by Adrian Hayday from London of behalf of the BSI. Reviews of the presented lectures have been published in different journals and abstracts were published by the European Journal of Immunology. The attendance up to the 10th anniversary, varying between 70 and 100, was 75 % from the neighboring Czechia, Austria or Slovakia, about 20% from western Europe and about 5% from other countries. On the other hand, the invited speakers (decreased from the initial 30 to 24) came from western (60%) or central (20%) or outside (20%) Europe (North America, Japan & Israel). The High Tatra venues involved regular water rafting along the Slovakian-Polish border.

The change in environment is such that, in the beginning, a folk band played at every dinner, and then people would sit, sing, and drink late into the night, often in a cabin or around a campfire. Later, in the elegant Patria hotel, a pianist playing "café music, although some participants have been nostalgic for folk music at first conferences.

The EFIS-Tatra Conference to be re-instated (after its 'Covid-related break for 8 years) in 2026 at the attractive venue in southern Moravia can look ahead with confidence to its 32nd

anniversary. The organizers are all at the prime stage of their careers and resourceful on spotting the topical subjects for future programs.

25. November, 2025.

Juraj Ivanyi

Emeritus professor of Immunology of Infectious Diseases,

Centre for Host-Microbiome Interactions, Guy's Campus of Kings College London