CELEBRATING PUBLIC HEALTH LIVES

Marcus (Marek) Klingberg, 1918-2015

On 30 November 2015, in Paris, at the age of over 97, the long, fruitful and astonishing life of Marcus (Marek) Klingberg came to an end.

In addition to his epidemiological skill, which was appreciated worldwide, Marek was a true man, a skillful research organizer, a fascinating teacher and – consequently - a friend to many public health scholars of my generation, both in Italy and abroad.

I first got in touch with him in the Early Seventies, when I dedicated myself to epidemiological studies on congenital malformations. With some colleagues, we were trying to establish a monitoring system also in this country. Marek was very kind in helping us and – in order to propagate the idea - we published together a paper in a leading Italian journal of medicine (Minerva Medica) (1).

The year before, in 1974, he had been among the founders of the International Clearinghouse for Birth Defects Monitoring Systems, established with the help of the March of Dimes as a communication tool to make it easier to share data collected by monitoring systems of
different countries, using agreed standard methods and format (2). Many members of the Clearinghouse were also active in the European Teratology Society, for which I had agreed to organize in Italy. September 1976, the 5th Conference, whose program was ready before the summer vacations of 1976.

During the preparation of the Conference, which was due in September 1976 in Gargnano on Lake Garda, in a fascinating summer location of the University of Milan (my academic work-place at that time), a dramatic event shook the scientific and sanitary world. In a factory producing chemical products for agriculture in Meda, north of Milan (ICMESA-Givaudan SpA, subsidiary of Hoffman La Roche), a chemical reactor suddenly exploded, causing a cloud of gases and particles to be ejected into the open air, where the wind dispersed it over a crowded area. While no effects were seen among the workers inside the factory, 193 people were immediately affected by the cloud and showed signs of intoxication, mostly a kind of acne, later identified as “chloracne”. An emergency was declared by the Regional Government, but it was only after many days, as a consequence of pressure by the Lombardy Region on the managers of Hoffman La Roche, that we were informed that the cloud could have contained large amounts of 2,3,7,8-tetraclorodibenzo-p-dioxin. TCDD – its achronim - was suspected of causing, in addition to chloracne, several other serious conditions, including teratogenic effects.

I was invited by the Regional Government to coordinate the Epidemiological Commission, which prepared a plan for epidemiological monitoring. I contacted Marcus Klingberg asking for suggestions on how to include the search for malformations in the plan and inviting him to participate in the Gargnano Conference where – in a “Seveso Roundtable” organized as a last-minute contribution – my duty was to present the preliminary data on the epidemiology of the Seveso accident. The general goal was the attempt to assess the possible teratogenic risks resulting from TCDD exposure (3).

After that event Klingberg became consultant epidemiologist to the Lombardy Region and was asked to participate in the International Steering Committee for the Seveso incident (“Comitato dei garanti”, members of which included Irving Selikoff, Nathan Mantel, Donald Young and Robert Miller), and was elected chairman. His work was supported by Dr Vittorio Carreri from Region Lombardy, in charge for all activities of medical prevention.

The Steering Committee had to back-up the Regional Committee in the investigation of the effects of TCDD exposure and in assessing whether it had any impact on either mortality or any health consequences, including birth defects.

This final task was objectively very difficult to achieve, because most pregnant women living in the area closest to the factory had meanwhile decided to have an induced abortion, so no malformations could be detected.

The Steering Committee, chaired very professionally by Marek, went on for several years. They approved an epidemiological monitoring system for the total population of 220,000 inhabitants. Apart from 193 cases of chloracne, some very serious, no other major adverse effects were detected during the first few years following the Seveso incident. To avoid political pressure, the Committee held its meetings in camera, and only after finalizing its recommendations did it disclose them to the Ufficio Speciale di Seveso, an ad hoc administrative body, in the presence of the media. The Seveso incident resulted in standardized industrial safety regulations in the European Union, which are now known as the Seveso I to III Directives (4).

Marek, who came to Italy very often, became a friend of many of us, he was my guest more than once in my summer resort at Lago d’Orta.
At the beginning of 1983, when he was 66 years old, abruptly, we lost all contact with him: he simply disappeared. Some uncontrolled news came later that he was sick in some European hospital and even that he had “broken out” and was hospitalized for a mental disease.

It was only years later that the truth emerged. A letter by Ruhama Marton, founder of the Association of Israeli-Palestinian Physicians for Human Rights, to BMJ (5) revealed that Marek was in an Israeli jail, serving a 20-year sentence, and that he was severely ill at the age of 77, but the Court had rejected his appeal for early release on humanitarian grounds.

The scientific community was astonished. What had happened in 1983? Let Marek himself give an explanation (6):

“My professional life was very full until 19 January 1983, the day my scientific career ended abruptly. On that day I was secretly arrested, interrogated harshly, tried in camera, and sentenced to a 20-year prison term, because I had provided highly secret scientific information to the Soviet Union. For the first 10 years of my 20-year sentence I was held in solitary confinement, in a high security prison, under a false name and a fabricated profession.

So, Marek was a spy! This fact was proved by the Israeli Secret Services (Shin Bet) during the trial, but it was admitted by Marek himself: he confirms in this paper (as previously in the book “Hameragel ha’aharon” or “The last spy” published in 2007 (7) and in an interview to Epidemiology of 2005 (8), that he “had provided highly secret scientific information to the Soviet Union”.

Our astonishment for his second, secret life, was great and total. We could not understand how this man could have lived two parallel lives for so many years, while he was cooperating with us on the monitoring of congenital malformations and on the Seveso incident, and we did not suspect anything.

But the true question was: why? To try to make that clear, you must follow the incredible stages of his life. Marek was born in Poland in a religious Jewish family and was attending the Warsaw Medical School in 1939, when his father forced him to take refuge in the Soviet Union to avoid the fate that later snatched the life of the whole family: deportation and extermination in the Nazi camp of Treblinka. He was admitted to the Medical School of Minsk (Byelorussia), where he graduated in June 1941, exactly when the Germans launched their attack on the Soviet Union. He volunteered in the Red Army as a Captain of the Medical Corps. After being wounded on the front, he was sent to Perm in the Urals and entrusted to an Army Epidemiological Unit, with the duty of fighting epidemics of typhus, and later to Moscow for a post-graduate training under the supervision of Lev Gromashevski, the master of Soviet epidemiology, who convinced him that epidemiology was to become his life’s work. After the liberation of Minsk he returned as Chief Epidemiologist to the Byelorussian Republic, where again he was confronted with typhus and other infectious diseases. After the war he returned to Poland as Deputy High Commissioner at the Ministry of Health for two years, and in 1948 the Klingberg family emigrated to Israel.

In Israel, Marek worked in increasingly senior positions in the Division of Preventive Medicine, in the Office of the Surgeon General of the Israel Defence Forces. In the 1950s, he encountered outbreaks of a disease of unknown origin, which came to be known as West Nile Fever. His group was the first to describe its natural history, epidemiological distribution, clinical presentation and laboratory findings, which reported in a series of papers published in leading journals (9, 10). He left his position as Director and Chief Epidemiologist of the Israel Defence Forces in 1953, after being appointed to direct the Military Medical Research Laboratories, and in 1957, he left the army to become the Deputy Scientific Director of the Israel Institute for Biological Research at Ness Ziona. According to newsmen’s opinions this
was one of the most clandestine institutions in Israel where Israel was developing biological and chemical weapons as well as counter-measures (11).

Later, Klingberg became Professor of Epidemiology at Tel Aviv University and chaired the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine: the position he held when I met him.

While the career of Marek reached the top in Israel, a feeling of gratitude to the USSR and their people who not only saved his life but also planned and helped his career in epidemiology remained strong: he spoke of this sentiment during our conversations, but I could not imagine that, as a consequence of this gratefulness, another kind of connection, though not driven at all by lust for money, had been established since the 1950s. Marek was a kind man, but you could easily understand that he was hiding many secrets: obviously, you were driven to believe that they referred to the many vicissitudes of his complex life, and to the much suffering.

When interviewed by Alfredo Morabia for Epidemiology (8), Marek was explicit: “When the Russians contacted me in the 1950s, I could not not see any grounds on which I could refuse to provide them with the information they were asking. It was a personal decision, for which I am not seeking understanding at all and for which I paid heavily. However, this never influenced my scientific work. I was not even directly involved with work connected with the information I was asked to provide. I believed that if both superpowers were in possession of scientific information, it would be in the interest of human-kind. Although passing information to the Soviet Union was an illegal act, I am convinced that it has not caused any damage to Israel’s security”.

And when writing personally (6): “In spite of my suffering during this long imprisonment, I have never regretted my modest attempt during the Cold War to undermine what I believed to be the dangers associated with imbalances in scientific knowledge. My feelings about this remain with me despite the fall of the Soviet Union – a country to which not only I owe my life, as well as my career in epidemiology and my most useful work; but, above all, the opportunity to fight fascism”.

His explanation, in short, is that passing secret information was his way to reduce the scientific gap between the USSR and the Western Countries and, therefore, to contribute to maintain peace between the two contenders! An original idea, quite difficult for us to understand and accept, but it was his conviction, and for it he accepted all the consequences. Of course this explanation did not satisfy everybody in Israel: as an example, the daily Haaretz formulated a contemptuous judgment (11) about what Marek wrote in his book (7).

After a first refusal to free Marek for humanitarian reasons after 10 years in a secret jail, in 1998 he was admitted to serve the remaining five years of his sentence under house arrest and finally, in 2003, at the age of 85, he was freed and granted the permission to fly to Paris and live there with his daughter and grandson, on condition that he would never speak about his secret work. Wanda Jasinska – a microbiologist among his co-workers at Ness Ziona and his sweet wife, whom he would never see after his imprisonment - had died years before.

Marek’s life in Paris lasted a long time, until he reached the age of 97. He wrote a book (7) and an article about his previous scientific life and the dramatic event of his imprisonment (6) and provided an interview to Epidemiology (8). In September 2008 I was e-mailed by a movie director who had the intention to make a documentary film on the life of Marek, asking me to be one of the witnesses. But after the first contact, nothing followed.

At the very beginning of January 2016, Marek’s daughter Sylvia e-mailed me to tell me that Marek died on November 30 2015. In an envelope her father left her to open after his death, he asked that I be informed.
As a conclusion for this long story, and at the end of such a long and astonishing life, a clear and attractive memory remains of Marcus Klingberg, a memory shared by all those who met him on different occasions but, above all, during the long commitment to solve the problem of Seveso and the efforts of the many scientists who participate in the International Clearinghouse for Birth Defects Surveillance and Research (the new name for the Clearinghouse founded in 1974), whose scientific Centre for the coordination of the surveillance activity is located in Rome, managed by Pierpaolo Mastroiacovo, a pediatrician who was also a good friend to Marek.

Rest in peace, dear friend, after such an incredible life, even more incredible because in part unexpected: you enlightened epidemiological research in many fields, you contributed so much to the progress of science, You gave your friendship and your advice to so many of us; and you paid a terrible price for what you did in the belief that it was fair, and it is so difficult for us to explain, understand and agree. But you deserve great respect because you took the responsibility of following your conscience and you had the courage to pay for it.

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References