

Tribute to Professor Robert A Shaw

By Roberto Acevedo

In a book to be published by Professor Robert Shaw, he wrote about his links with and visits to Chile.

“My colleague at Birkbeck College, Professor Colin D Flint, had in the late 1970s a Chilean research student, Roberto Acevedo, working for his PhD from the University of London. By 1982, we heard that Roberto had been elected Head of the Department of Chemistry at the Facultad de Ciencias Físicas y Matemáticas de la Universidad de Chile.

He held that position for more than 4.5 years. My name was proposed by Roberto to his academic staff to invite me as a distinguished visitor to the Department to explore the possibility of a research collaboration, perhaps analogous to the ones I had at that time with Professor A R Vasudeva Murthy at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, India and with a team headed by Dr Jean-Francois Labarre at the University Paul Sabatier in Toulouse, France. Both, especially the one in Bangalore, were very productive. I have described them, as well as others with Turkey and Poland, in a recent publication:

The Bangalore-Birkbeck Phosphazene Project 1971-1981 - A Retrospect on this and other International and Interdisciplinary Scientific Research Collaborations.

The very energetic and enthusiastic Jean-Francois Labarre went to great lengths to get me my first Honorary Doctorate, an honour, which I valued greatly, especially as the previous recipient chemist to have received this, had been the great Linus Pauling (1901-1994), double Nobel Laureate (Chemistry 1954 and Peace 1962). I had the privilege to meet the great man on one of my American lecture tours and to discuss with him the bonding in the Phosphazenes, on which my research was focussed.

Roberto had hoped for research collaboration between Professor Jaime Retuert's group in Santiago and mine at Birkbeck. My visit was for about a month; I gave numerous lectures and had many discussions.

I made a comment about, that this was my very first visit, when I had to actually cross the equator, though in the past, I had come quite close to it, during my last army posting, in Singapore, in the 1940s.

Later that year UNESCO supported a symposium in Santiago and I was invited to deliver a plenary lecture. Both my wife, Dr Leyla S Shaw, a crystallographer, and I attended. We were warmly welcomed by Roberto and his colleagues. The decision was already taken in Santiago-Chile, and the researchers in Organic and related topics were extremely keen to get a collaboration going between our two groups.

I mentioned that we had access and expertise in crystallography and Leyla was a professional expert in this broad and growing branch of research. People were very enthusiastic about the prospect of such a wide and quite illuminating collaboration.

We heard that at that time the only crystallography facility in South America was in Brazil.

Everybody tried very hard to get this collaborative project going; somehow, to our great regret, we did not succeed in this.

After Chile, my wife and I visited Bolivia and Peru. In the latter we had our first sight of the lost city of the Incas, Macchu Picchu.

All the Shaws, my wife, our son Robert Jr, our daughter Lily and I, became quite addicted to South America, and described it as “our favourite touring destination”. As a family, we visited in 1999 Ecuador, including the Galapagos Islands, and Peru. Our children, both young physicians, have spent part of their gap years there, as well as periods for their medical professional training.

Roberto and I became firm friends and we stayed in contact over the years.

I cannot resist in telling you of another Santiago contact, which arose from my history interests. Apart from a profound interest in all branches of science (from cosmology to genetics), I have also been all my life fascinated by history and have read vast amounts. Two chance meetings, 41 years apart, got me started in writing (jointly with my physician daughter) about the History of Medicine. Our topic “**The pre-Anschluss Vienna School of Medicine**”.

How did this, a series of papers on the History of Medicine, come about? After all, I am a well-established Professor of Chemistry, not a Historian by training. The cause – a series of coincidences, triggered by two chance meetings, the first in 1969 in Jaipur, India and the second in 2010 in Vienna, Austria. The essay arising from this, became too long and the, then, Editor of *The Journal of Medical Biography* suggested dividing this into three papers. The three papers were really meant to be read in conjunction and in the order: 1. The Surgeons, 2. The Physicians, 3. The Medical Scientists. This very prestigious journal used to be published by the Royal Society of Medicine, but had been passed to a commercial publisher, which publishes it on behalf of the Society. I found the new publishers, appallingly slow. The manuscripts were submitted and accepted by the Editor in 2012! They appeared Online in 2014. The first of our papers “The Surgeons” appeared in print in the February 2016 issue, “The Physicians” in May 2016 and “The Medical Scientists” (with our scoop, a letter by Albert Einstein to the Medicine Nobel Laureate Otto Loewi!) only in August 2016.

These three papers are all due to a series of coincidences, which had prompted me into action.

I have always believed in the paternal relationship between the research supervisor and research student, which is well caught in the German phrase *Doktorvater*! I expected dedication to thorough and hard work and on my part tried to provide total scientific and pastoral care (Science, general education and culture, health, finance, etc). Thus, as I had had a lot of Indian research students, this was most probably the catalyst to my being

invited to India as the First academic visitor under The Commonwealth Education Co-operation Scheme in 1969. In Jaipur I met Robert Heilig (1897-1989), a refugee cardiologist from the Nazis from Vienna. Heilig was a highly respected Emeritus Professor of Medicine in Jaipur. The Medical Library there carries his name.

In 2010 at a dinner in Vienna with Peter Braunwarth, a Professor of Literary History, an expert on Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931), a famous Austrian writer (based on Schnitzler's story in 1897, Max Ophüls (1902-1957) made the film in 1950 with the same name, *La Ronde*, which some of you may remember), we learned that Heilig had been in the 1920s in Vienna an Assistant to Karel Wenckebach (1864-1940). This sparked an immediate recognition from my daughter Lily, who, like all medics, had heard of Wenckebach, the famous Dutch cardiologist, who had been a Professor in Vienna. We visited the Grinzing cemetery, photographed Wenckebach's grave [as well as that of the composer, Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)], then visited the University arcade, etc. Thus the three papers began to develop.

We heard a number of anecdotes about Robert Heilig from Peter Braunwarth. Sometime after I had met Robert Heilig in Jaipur in early 1969, he had suffered a heart attack and decided to return with his wife to Vienna.

We had obtained photographs for six out of the eight medical luminaries, we had written about. We lacked these for Otto Loewi (1873-1961) and Robert Bárány (1876-1936), both Nobel Laureates. A very helpful young man at the Swedish embassy in London tracked down Bárány's grandson, an Emeritus Professor of Physics in Sweden, who provided a photograph and a wealth of information. We became firm friends.

After a very long search, I discovered in London the son, Stephen Matthews, of a British pioneer woman scientist, Janet Warden Brown (1901-1983), who had done post-doctoral studies with the Nobel Laureate Fritz Pregl (1869-1930) in Graz in the 1920s and met the future Nobel Laureate, Otto Loewi, there. She had given refuge in England to Loewi's youngest son, Guido, after the Nazi Anschluss. Her son knew that this youngest Loewi, Guido, was then, in his 90s, still alive in Thailand. Through this route I managed to get a photograph of Otto Loewi. I thanked Guido Loewi (1915-2012) AKA (Geoffrey William Low) by email. Then another surprise - an email from the younger brother, John Gee, of one of my first PhD students, Wilfred Gee (1939-1998), of 50 years ago. In the late 1950s/middle to late 1960s my research was the flavour of the month with British and American grant givers – my proverbial biblical fat years for research funding!! I had one of the largest research teams in the UK – over 20 – all supported by my grants!! I was sufficiently flush with funds to be able to give enthusiastic older schoolboys some money in their vacation to help them with their finances and thus for them to help my researchers with their work. This email came from the younger brother (one of those schoolboys) of one of my PhD students. This lad became a pharmacist. To cut a long story short. This “lad”, now retired and in his late 60s, had holidayed with his wife in Thailand for many years and had made the acquaintance of Loewi's son. He now resurfaced after 50 years and

brought me *inter alia* the Albert Einstein (1879-1955) letter to Otto Loewi (1873-1961) with Guido's permission to publish it.

I cannot resist telling you about another coincidence. In March this year I received an email from a Chilean cardiologist (living in Santiago), who had been attending a medical meeting in Vienna. He had seen an earlier Online version of one of these papers, in which we had written about Karel Wenckebach and had visited Wenckebach's grave.

Dear Professor Shaw. First of all, congratulations for your interesting article about Wenckebach published in JMed Biogr 2014. Few weeks ago I travelled to Wien and visited Grinzing Cemetery. Also the great Mahler is there. I am a Cardiologist and Electrophysiologist from Santiago de Chile. Warm regards Jose Pardo

I reminisced with him that I had been a Visiting Professor in Santiago 30 years ago and had also lectured there at a major UNESCO symposium, which I had attended with my crystallographer wife in the same Chilean city, Santiago, also later in 1986. The world is small indeed!"

The above are quotations from Professor Robert Shaw's own writings.

Here is my own input in my own words.

I must say that by that time, it was most probably that the most appropriate facilities to undertake real and good research in crystallography was mainly located in Brazil. Having said so, it is to be mentioned that at the Physics Department of the Facultad de Ciencias Físicas y Matemáticas, the decision was taken to make an active group of research in crystallography, lead by Professor Oscar Wittke and his collaborators Daphne Boys and Maria Teresa Garland, among others.

My personal tribute to the research work of Professor Robert Shaw is based upon my knowledge of his research activities at the Chemistry Department of Birkbeck College, University of London. I was always impressed by the hard work carried out by this scientist, who did not run away from the very big challenge of heading a huge group of researchers. He is a very serious person, though he shows up a lovely care and affection for people. I shall never forget, once I was honoured by this distinguish scientist, when I was invited to sign on the 6th February 1990 his Visitors' Book, which contains the names and signatures of many eminent chemists, several of them Nobel Laureates: Alexander Todd (1907-1997), Derek Barton (1918-1998), Georg Wittig (1897-1987), Carl Djerassi (1923-2015), Alan G MacDiarmid (1927-2007), Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin (1910-1994) and many, many others, visitors to his research group. I was indeed an outsider, since he was involved in the chemistry of complex systems, mainly with inorganic analogues of organic chemistry.

He was extremely glad to serve the College and he became Doctor Honoris Causa in France among other many, many distinctions. Professor Shaw was extremely smart and in a way he was rather unique.

He has a beautiful family. He is married to a lovely and very distinguished lady, Dr Leyla Shaw, a crystallographer. I met their son, Robert Jr. Later he was joined by a sister, young Lily. This gentleman always managed to create the right environment to make you feel happy and at home. Please, do not your ever forget that “home is where your heart is”, and he found love and care together with wife, children, family and beloved people.

I used to work in both atomic and molecular spectroscopy under the supervision of both Professors Colin Flint (Birkbeck College) and Stephen Mason (1923-2007) (King’s College, QEPD). I must say that I was invited to their homes on several occasions and both of them were very kind and gave me a warm welcome.

I failed on more than one occasion to visit Professor Shaw at his home, though I do apologize and I do regret not having reached to that wonderful place in due time. I believe that the windows are always open to visit us, though the distance between us (Chile-United Kingdom) is very great, but we do care about each other. He is another member of my distinguished family. Professor Robert Shaw has published over 360 peer reviewed papers and has over 20 patents.

My Dear Professor Shaw, this is a rather unique opportunity to acknowledge all you have done on my behalf, so please do accept my warmest regards and very best wishes. My excuses for my mistakes and no formalities with you. Do have my blessing and I pray for your health.