Acta Biochimica Polonica

Vol. 51 No. 4/2004

1091–1093

QUARTERLY

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editors,

It has been very interesting to learn that one of the members of the contemporary academic community in Wilno★, Dr. Birutė Railienė, proposes to the editors and readers of *Acta Biochimica Polonica,* to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the first edition of the book *Teorya Jestestw Organicznych* (*Theory of Organic Entities*) by Jędrzej Śniadecki, at that time professor of chemistry at Wilno University.

In her letter to the Editor, Dr. Railienė writes that this was the first handbook of biochemistry in the Polish language. This statement may be accepted by contemporary biochemists only if one keeps in mind that significant fragments of the book published earlier by J. Śniadecki – *Początki chemii* (Eng. *Rudiments of Chemistry*) also contained some topics on the subject of biochemistry tought today. Several biographers of Jędrzej Śniadecki characterize the book *Teorya Jestestw Organicznych* rather as a manual of physiology (Mozołowski, 1938). It is of course a remarkable piece of work, presenting a wealth of ideas and knowledge at the end of XVIII/beginning of XIX century, about life in general, about the functioning of living organisms, biological interactions, conditions necessary to preserve health, and on some causes of human diseases. The book also contains some interesting personal views and philosophical considerations of the author, mentioned in the letter of Dr. Railienė.

Figure: Lithography of Jędrzej Śniadecki reproduced from "Jędrzej Śniadecki. Teorya Jestestw Organicznych w obec dzisiejszych pojęć o życiu" by Z. Kramsztyk, Warszawa, 1874.

★"Wilno" is the Polish name for Vilnius.

The question raised above – whether we may now call the book edited 200 years ago – a manual of biochemistry or of physiology is of minor importance. Important is that the author of this book, an outstanding physician, chemist, biologist and thinker, began writing scientific books in his native Polish language, popularizing in this way the natural sciences and chemistry among those whose knowledge of Latin was less than of Polish.

When, in 1797, nominated professor of chemistry in Wilno, Jędrzej Śniadecki started to lecture in Polish, in contrast to the tradition of lecturing in Latin at the universities, his lectures attracted not only students of the university from different faculties, professors and physicians from the town, but also "ladies from society" – as several memoirists of those days wrote (Strojnowski, 1970). The attractiveness of the chemistry lectures given by J. Śniadecki was probably due both to his oratorial talent and to his presentation of the subject in an interesting modern way, describing the experiments and ideas of A.L. Lavoisier, executed only a few years earlier (1794) in Paris by the authorities of the Great French Revolution. One can imagine that many among the audience of the lectures were aware of the Lavoisier execution. After he had been sentenced to death, he wrote a petition to the tribunal asking to delay the execution for a few months to enable him to finish the experiments he had just started. In those experiments Lavoisier aimed to test his hypothesis about the similarity between human respiration and candle combustion. The answer of the tribunal was: *La revolution n'a pas le besoin des savants* (the revolution does not need scientists). The conviction about the necessity of education and the usefulness for society of the development of sciences can be found in many writings of Jędrzej Śniadecki.

Major difficulty in lecturing on chemistry in Polish and writing a chemistry handbook for students, must have been the lack of Polish chemical nomenclature. Jędrzej Śniadecki overcame this difficulty in a short time, creating the first Polish chemical vocabulary, a completely new nomenclature in the Polish language. This achievement was very highly prized for many years. Several generations of Polish chemists, biochemists and teachers appreciated its chemical precision and linguistic correctness. Almost 100 years after J. Śniadecki's death, two prominent professors of biochemistry disagreed which name of benzoic acid should be used in a Polish biochemistry handbook currently under preparation: *kwas benzoesowy* or *kwas będźwinowy*. Decisive in their discussion was the chemical nomenclature in *Początki chemii* by Jędrzej Śniadecki.

The proposed reminder of the anniversary of the first edition of *Teorya Jestestw Organicznych* is a good opportunity to direct the attention of readers of *Acta Biochimica Polonica* to another book by Jędrzej Śniadecki which was edited several times, but not translated into any foreign language. This is the work *O fizycznem wychowaniu dzieci* (Eng. *On the Physical Education of Children*) which was written in complete form in 1822 (Śniadecki, 1855), but several fragments of which had been published earlier in the newspaper "Dziennik Wileński". In this book containing several original ideas, for the first time the observation was published that rickets in children could be cured by sunlight. This fact was overlooked by several authors, e.g., by L. J. Harris in his fundamental book on vitamins in 1935. However, this was corrected in a letter to "Nature" by Włodzimierz Mozołowski (Mozołowski, 1939), professor of physiological chemistry in Wilno in the years 1935–1939, and in Gdańsk in the years 1945–1965.

The enduring popularity in Poland of Jędrzej Śniadecki is remarkable. One suspects that this is a continuation of the exceptional popularity of his attractive chemistry lectures of 200 years ago among the general public, perhaps also of his successful medical practice. At present almost every town in Poland has named one of its streets "Śniadecki

Street" or "Brothers Jan and Jędrzej Śniadecki Street". Several schools have commemorated J. Śniadecki by giving his name to lecture halls or to the school itself. In Gdańsk, the lecture hall of the chemical faculty at the Technical University has been named "Jędrzej Śniadecki lecture hall", and the school of physical education in this town adopted the name "Jędrzej Śniadecki University of Physical Education in Gdańsk". The citizens of Żnin (the town in which Śniadecki was born) have built a bas-relief, with the likeness of the two brothers Jan and Jędrzej Śniadecki, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Jędrzej Śniadecki's death in 1938. The compatriots of Śniadecki from Żnin commemorated also the 200th anniversary of Jędrzej Śniadecki's birth in 1968 by producing plates with a picture of Jędrzej.

There are many biographies of Jędrzej Śniadecki available published in Poland at different times during the past two centuries, and also analytical publications presenting the achievements of this erudite scholar in different fields of his activity, e.g. Stasiewicz, 1970. A re-edition of some publications by J. Śniadecki was done after the second world war, selected and commented on by Bolesław Skarżyński (Śniadecki, 1970). The 200th anniversary of Jędrzej Śniadecki's birth in 1968 was an occasion to organize several scientific sessions devoted to the life and work of this remarkable scholar, the first university professor to lecture in chemistry in Polish. I take the opportunity to remind the reader of the session organized by the Gdańsk Scientific Society in December 1968, during which a collection of publications by and about Jędrzej Śniadecki was exhibited (Żydowo, 1969).

Concluding, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Birutė Railienė, from the Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Wilno, for reminding us that this year should be celebrated as the 200th anniversary of the first edition of *Teorya Jestestw Organicznych* by Jędrzej Śniadecki. A man whose contribution to university education in Wilno and whose impact on the development of culture in Poland cannot be overestimated.

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