Vol. 50 No. 2/2003

XV–XVI

QUARTERLY

*Editorial*

# Reminiscences

Jerzy Pawełkiewicz, Poznań

*Acta Biochimica Polonica* is celebrating its 50th birthday. My encounter with this first Polish biochemical journal and my publications in it took place in the nineteen fifties. This was a period in my life in which I worked on vitamin $B_{12}$ and its different derivatives.

In 1951 I was a research associate in the Chair of Agricultural Technology (KTR) at the WSR (Agricultural University) in Poznań. The Chair was headed by Professor Józef Janicki, active, full of energy and ideas, with the temperament of a manager. He quickly rebuilt the Chair which became quite well equipped in comparison to many other academic departments. For example KTR as one of the first had a good class spectrophotometer, centrifuges making it possible to spin down 1 liter volumes and a rapidly developed library.

The first task that Prof. Janicki entrusted me with was the isolation of vitamin $B_{12}$, which had been discovered three years earlier independently in pharmaceutical laboratories in England and the United States. This work was started rapidly by our small team. The primary source of the vitamin for our work were *Streptomyces griseus* cultures commonly used for streptomycin production. The microbiological part of the task was assigned to Dr. K. Zodrow from the WSR Chair of Microbiology and he was assisted by St. Sawicki, MSc. (both later became professors at the Agricultural University and are no longer among us). During our work we encountered recurrent troublesome problems due to the lack of certain things. For instance we did not have fermentors for larger volumes of cultures. In order to overcome this problem we built in the University workshops a large shaker installed in a thermostat room. Because some preparations indispensable for microbiological cultures such as protein hydrolysates and yeast extract were not available we prepared them ourselves.

A lot of team work soon gave us crystalline vitamin $B_{12}$.

In this story more important than the repetition of vitamin $B_{12}$ isolation was opening the possibility of investigating corynoid substances and the beginning of work on them, especially on those occurring in propionic bacteria. The cells of *Propionibacterium shermanii* in relatively anaerobic conditions produce considerable amounts of a corynoid derivative we named vitamin B 12p, which later turned out to be cyanocobamide, a precursor of vitamin $B_{12}$ lacking the hemimidazole- nucleotide group. This compound could be easily transformed by directed biosynthesis both into vitamin $B_{12}$ and into a number of its analogues.

The results of these investigations were published in the first volumes of *Acta Biochimica Polonica*.

This work was continued in the TR Chair and in the Chair of Biochemistry at the WSR created in 1956 and was often published in *Acta Biochimica Polonica*.

These investigations aroused considerable interest in our milieu attracting many young scientists.

When I recall that period today I must say that the main motor of our actions was in addition to natural professional ambition the thirst for knowledge. After isolation from science because of the war we were making up for the lost time. The hours spent in the lab did not count, and the lights were on late into the night.