

## **Mendel Medal Ceremony, Prague, Villa Lanna, 15 May 1996**

### **Mrs. Vice-President, ladies and gentlemen, dear Emil!**

First I have to thank Emil Palecek for his "eulogy". I could cite Hans Sachs from "Meistersinger":

"Euch macht ihr's leicht, mir macht ihr's schwer,  
gebt ihr mir Armen soviel Ehr!"  
("You make it difficult for me, but take it easy,  
giving so much honor to poor little me!")

I am naturally very honored to receive the Gregor Mendel Medal from the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, something I would have never envisaged in my wildest dreams and I thank you for this honor. I think, however, that my friendships with my Czech colleagues at a time when it was not evident are more important than my scientific contributions which Emil so much overrated. As you may know, although I was born and now live in Paris, I am Austrian by nationality and cultural background. I am therefore attached to a certain spirit of "Mitteleuropa" which was and is nowhere so lively and important than here in Prague. No other country has a great writer as a President! It also happens that my ancestors on my paternal grandmother's side came from a German speaking family from Moravia, from Moravska Trebova (Mährisch Trübau). I regret that the Czech language was not spoken and transmitted - although in Vienna many people spoke and still speak Czech (there is even the Komenski-Gymnasium which is taught in Czech). If one learned or spoke another language in that time in families in Central and Eastern Europe, it was rather French.

Johann Gregor Mendel was a product of this "Mitteleuropa". He was born on July 20, 1822 in Heinzendorf (Hyncice) near Odrau (Odry) in Lower Silesia at the Polish border. He was ordained an Augustinian priest in 1848 and was sent to study natural sciences in Vienna between 1851 and 1853 and then to Brno, where he taught natural sciences at the "Realschule" for 30 years. It was in this monastery in Brno that he made his now famous genetic experiments with garden peas. He presented the results on February 8 and March 8, 1865 to the Natural History Society in Brno and published them in the Proceedings of the Society (published in 115 copies!) - but he was totally ignored. In 1868 he was elected the Father Superior of the Augustinian monastery and school in Brno, a post which he held till his death in 1884. Over 30 years later, the Dutch biologist De Vries discovered his work and repeated and confirmed the experiments. We know today what has become of genetics and molecular biology.

If I put Mendel in this perspective, it is because I strongly believe in this "Mitteleuropa" spirit, although I may sound old-fashioned. It was my education and background in this spirit which approached me with my colleagues in Prague and Brno and in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe 30 years ago. Being a citizen between the blocs gave me an opportunity, but also an obligation, to bridge the differences in the political systems - which don't exist in science - on my tiny little level. It is my sincere wish that this "Mitteleuropa" spirit would live on at its best in a time where the driving forces in the world are money and profits. I hope that Prague as an intellectual and spiritual capital for centuries shall continue to be this "Mitteleuropa", this center of intellectual, cultural and scientific integration of Europe which is so badly needed today.

It is a great satisfaction for me that some of my friends who had so many difficulties in these years have emerged as important scientific figures today. The list of my friends here in the Czech Republic is long: the first is Emil Palecek which I visited the first time nearly 30 years ago in Brno. Vladimir Vetterl came a year later in my lab as my very first postdoc. Another old friend is Tonda Holy with whom we collaborated often. There are many more

friends, like Jaroslav Sponar and Vova Kleinwächter, Micaela Vorlickova and I think fondly of them.

I also want to remember three persons which are not with us anymore which I had the privilege to call friends: in the first place I think of my great friend Ivo Fric, who died just before the "velvet revolution". I shall never forget an evening with him and his wife in August 1988 where we were changing the world and "predicted" the fall of communism for around 1995 - it went much faster. I also want to remember Prof. Karel Blaha who did so much for the advancement of peptide chemistry in this country and Dr. Jaromir Koudelka, a joyous fellow from Brno.

Let me finish with one of the great "mitteleuropeans" from Prague who has also been associated with the three cities to which I am attached, Prague, Vienna and Paris, Rainer Maria Rilke. He wrote his first important collection of poems "Larenopfer" in Prague quite exactly 100 years ago. If you permit, I would like to read two of the poems of Rilke's Prague cyclus.

### **Rainer Maria Rilke**

#### ***Im alten Hause***

Im alten Hause, vor mir frei  
seh ich ganz Prag in weiter Runde,  
tief unten geht die Dämmerstunde  
mit lautlos leisem Schritt vorbei.

Die Stadt schwimmt wie hinter Glas.  
Nur hoch, wie ein behelmter Hüne,  
ragt klar vor mir die grüspangrüne  
Turmkuppel von Sankt Nicolas.

Schon blinzelt da und dort ein Licht  
fern auf im schwülen Stadtgebrause.  
Mir ist, daß in dem alten Hause  
jetzt eine Stimme "Amen" spricht.

#### ***Kajetán Tyl***

(Bei Betrachtung seines Zimmerchens, das auf der böhmischen ethnographischen Ausstellung zusammengestellt war.)

Da hat der arme Tyl  
sein Lied "Kde domov m°uj" geschrieben.  
In Wahrheit: wen die Musen lieben,  
dem gibt das Leben nicht zu viel.

Ein Stübchen - nicht zu klein dem Flug  
des Geistes, nicht zu groß zur Ruhe -  
Ein Stuhl, als Schreibtisch eine Truhe,  
ein Bett, ein Holzkreuz und ein Krug.

Doch wär er nicht für tausend Louis  
von Böhmen fort. Mit jeder Fiber  
hing er daran. - "Ich bleibe lieber"  
hat er gesagt."Kde domov m°uj"