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Herman Lent, Scientist and Citizen – I

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Dr. Herman Lent: *1911 – †2004

I am greatly honored to write about Dr. Herman Lent, a well-known researcher, professor of entomology, helminthology and above all a “Professor of Life”. A man who spread his knowledge and thoughts throughout his work, attitudes and way of life.

His life, both personal and scientific, had two bases: honesty and strength. His expectations were always very high with regard to others but especially in relation to himself. His direct and frank style was

sometimes troublesome to others but was simply his way of being direct and true. He was also a generous and kind man.

Herman Lent never worked as a medical doctor but was a gifted teacher. He had only a few close disciples due to his high expectations in terms of character, discipline and dedication: José Jurberg at the Instituto Oswaldo Cruz, Alberto Valderrama at Universidad de Los Andes in Venezuela, and myself, at first at Universidade Santa Úrsula and later on at Instituto Oswaldo Cruz. Nevertheless, he changed the way of thinking of hundreds of students of different ages, in different areas and in different countries, i.e., the secondary school at Pedro II, technical parasitological courses at Instituto Oswaldo Cruz, undergraduate courses at Santa Úrsula and Universidad de Los Andes, and post-graduate courses in Brazil, Paraguay and Venezuela. Examples of his good behavior, honesty, hard studying and fighting for his ideals extended over many years.

He was considered the most demanding professor. Why? His approach was to develop and direct the experience and persistence of future researchers. This excellent professor awoke in his students the passion for the subject, despite the fear of his practical and written tests. The majority of his students remember him with warm-hearted feelings. He told us several times that he had taught for so long that he was used to meeting former students everywhere. Many of them had the habit of sending him kind letters and cards, which were carefully kept for years.

At Universidade Santa Úrsula (1976-2003), he

formed a group of old and new friends who had the tradition of meeting every Thursday for lunch; the group included Hugo de Souza Lopes (entomologist), Domingos Arthur Machado Filho (helminthologist), Moacyr Vaz de Andrade (biochemist), Emilio Mittidieri (biochemist) José Lopez Cuadra (pharmacologist), Artur Steenhagem Ramos de Souza (biochemist) and Annete Corrêa Esteves (biochemist). The main reasons for these gatherings were to keep the tradition, to learn from the others, to discuss trends in biology, biochemistry and politics and to train a new generation of assistants. This reminded him of his beginning at Instituto Oswaldo Cruz as a student where senior researchers and assistants had lunch together in the old “tea house”. In other such educational opportunities, the long talks in the laboratory, we listening to his stories, were also daily lessons. He used to say that in science we inherited not only his knowledge and his friends but also his enemies. His last generation of students included Melissa Querido Cardenas, Cristina Dias Mogrovejo and Elizabeth Mourão.

His importance to science in Brazil is striking. He followed the rule of ‘freedom as a keyword in science’, i.e. freedom to work in “basic” or “applied” research, without frontiers and freedom to choose the language in which to publish. He always preferred to write his papers in Portuguese but also wrote in English.

His letters were sometimes critical. The editorial board of the *Revista Brasileira de Biologia*, currently *Brazilian Journal of Biology*, and the Academia Brasileira de Ciências received his letters of protest. He could not understand the changes that had taken place in the journal, created at Instituto Oswaldo Cruz in 1941 and donated to the Academy in 1970, due to political problems at the time. The change of name, the official language of the country not being accepted, and the disappearance of the logo of the Academia Brasileira de Ciências were not comprehensible to him. As the founder and Editor-in-Chief for so many years, he was trying to give advice as an old, experienced member of the Academy. He reckoned that the decision of not considering for publication papers written in the official language of

the country affronted our Constitution. He pointed out that the same had occurred in relation to the *Memórias do Instituto Oswaldo Cruz* and the journal had to reconsider its decision. He finished by saying, “*I’m not charging for the advice on ethics, protection of our patrimony or patriotism*”. This was Herman Lent.

He also believed that discussing the importance of “basic” or “applied” research was not worthwhile. Several different approaches to research are always necessary and changes in direction for a scientist are quite natural. Hence, the belief that one research line is more important than others was not fruitful.

He was a goodhearted man. He helped researchers, technicians, students, friends and employees. Those who were not close to him and just listened to his ideas may think he was always strong. I can testify that this hard image was just a shield that hid a gentle, helpful and sensitive friend. He frequently surprised those who, not knowing him well, used to expect strong opinions based on his reputation. His forceful words were only used to try to show what, in his opinion, was the right way. Encouragement, praise and compliments were more usual in his way of being.

In addition to his 160 papers in the field of entomology, in helminthology he published 81 related to the taxonomy and ultrastructure of nematodes (mainly capillariids), digeneans, monogeneans, cestodes and acanthocephalans (Jurberg and Santos 2004). The diversity of hosts included amphibians, reptiles, birds, different mammals such as bats, rodents and marsupials, and recently he worked on fish parasites. Two additional papers he co-authored were published posthumously: one on morphological aspects of fish parasites (Mogrovejo et al. 2004) and the other a description of a new species of nematode from rays (Santos et al. 2004).

In 2003, due to the difficult working conditions at Universidade Santa Úrsula, Herman Lent decided to return officially to the Institute despite the upheaval involved in transferring a whole laboratory and his huge library. During this transfer between institutions, he, without knowing it, was completing a cycle in his life.

He donated his collection of 17,000 papers to the library of Instituto Oswaldo Cruz, now part of the Herman Lent Collection. He also set up a new laboratory for helminthological studies in the Biology Department of Instituto Oswaldo Cruz with a fellowship from Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro – FAPERJ – (Cientista do Nosso Estado). However, he had one last worry. In the hospital, under an oxygen mask, his intense blue eyes and the strong hands indicated the importance of what he needed to recommend. His last words, almost semi-conscious, were: “Take care of the Entomological Collection of the Instituto Oswaldo Cruz. Do not let it die!”.

This brave Chevalier died on July 7, 2004. He was a senior authority, not only in science but also in dealing with public funds and above all in spreading his knowledge. He cared about people, many of them known and even more unknown.

We hope that his example will remain alive in us all.

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