

Ernest Gutmann in his own words

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First of all, my heartfelt thanks to the organizers of this meeting, Profs Ugo Carraro and Gerta Vrbova. On behalf of all the family, I want to say how much we appreciate their efforts in bringing this meeting together and honouring the memory of Ernest Gutmann.

I have left Prague as a student in 1968 and after that, regrettably, did not have many opportunities to know my father as an adult. Now I have come back to Prague to work at the Institute of Molecular Genetics and I pass by the Institute where my father worked every day. So to me, this meeting gave an impetus to go through the boxes of old photos and documents that I found in my sister's house. I would like to ask you to share with me some of my finds. I will show you some of these old photographs and read a few extracts from my father's diaries. The first picture of my father (Figure 1), dated 1926 when he was 16 yrs old, comes from his passport. Amazingly, it is from the very same passport with which he, with my mother, emigrated to England in 1939. By then he was already 29 and, as my mother told me, the old passport photo caused some nerve-racking troubles during that momentous journey.

In England, Oxford, my father worked on his PhD under Prof. J.Z. Young, Magdalen College, at the Department of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy. His thesis was on "Recovery of function after denervation in mammals". He got his Ph.D. in December 1943 (Figure 2) and continued to work at the University, as well as at the Wingfield – Morris Orthopedic Hospital, on muscle function after various types of nerve injury.

Being a great patriot and an idealist, he returned back to Prague immediately after the war ended. The family followed a year later (that is my mother, sister and me, our brother Thomas was born in Prague already).



Figure 1
Ernest Gutmann, 1926, 16 years old



Figure 2
E. Gutmann with his 1st baby Sylvia, Oxford 1943

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Figure 3
Back in Prague, 1952, with daughter Anna
and son Thomas
“... You stop automatically, you are at home”



Figure 4
Ernest Gutmann celebrating, perhaps his
birthday, with lady colleagues at the Institute
of Physiology in Prague, around 1955.

I have found a story called “A JOURNEY HOME” that he has written probably around that time and here are some quotations from it:

How strangely typecast is a journey home. When remembered, it comes to you as a charming old folk song. Repetitive, almost boring, but always with the same insistent force.

... Here they are, the mountains of your country! You are getting up, leaving your train compartment, and approaching the window. So here we are again! In front of you lies that grey-blue thread of the river, with its gently sloping banks. You turn around. May be some kind of foreigner is standing right behind you and would dearly like to know something about those hills, about this place...

... the first houses of your town now appear along the track. Casually, hands in your pockets, you return to your compartment as if to say: ” Oh yes, I need to get off at the next stop! There is nothing to keep me here any more.”

... One more brief look into the compartment meaning: ” So here I am getting off, that’s where I am from, dear folks!”

... May be someone is waiting, may be not? Suddenly in the sea of quite indifferent waiting eyes, an intimately known face may appear.

... You walk steadily, as if this was your daily journey to work. Simple, you are at home again!

... You are in your little street already. You stop automatically, you are at home. (Figure 3)

After working for some time as a doctor with the survivors of the Terezin concentration camp, my father became a research assistant at the Institute for Brain Research. In the early 50s, the Institute of Physiology was founded.

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Figure 5
At work at the Institute of Physiology in Prague
(late 50s)



Figure 6
1967. With Rita Levi Montalcini

Ernest Gutmann led The Department of the Physiology of the Neuromuscular System. He got together a productive and dynamic group of research workers (Figures 4, 5, 6), some of the names are shown below:

Bass Arnost	Anna Krejcova
Beranek Radan	Rohlicek Vojtech
Buresova M	Irena Slavikova
Drahota Zdenek	Ivo Syrovy
Fantis A.	Ujec Evzen
Hanzlikova Vera	Vodicka Zdenek
Hnik Pavel	Vrbova Gerta
Hudlicka Olga	Vyklicky Ladislav
Jakoubek Martin	Vyskocil Franta
Jirmanova Isa	Zak Radovan
Hanka Karouskova	Zelena Jirina
Klicpera M.	

It is quite remarkable that this group produced such exciting work in these difficult times.



Figure 7
The Physiology Institute moved
to new premises in 1965



Figure 8
1967. Gerta Vrbova at work (late 50s)

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Generally, in the 60s, things were gradually getting better. In 1962, Ernest organized an international symposium in Prague and edited "The denervated muscle". The Physiology Institute moved to new premises in 1965 (Fig. 7). The country became more open and travelling to conferences became possible. (Figure 8).

In June 1968, towards the end of so called "Prague Spring" (Fig. 9), my father signed an article called "Two thousand words", which backed up the reforms of that era.

"This spring ..., a great opportunity has come to us to take our common aim into our hands and to shape socialism such that it would better correspond to our formerly good reputation and to the relatively good opinion we used to have about ourselves. The spring has ended and it won't come back. We shall know all in winter..."

Then came August 1968 and the Soviet invasion. After it, the process of so called normalization started. Its aim was to revoke the reforms made during the Prague Spring and to purge the reformers from all key positions (Fig.10).

The signatories of "Two thousand words" were asked to retract or they will be disciplined and lose their positions. The next few extracts are taken from my father's diary during the period November 69 to September 70.

17-11-69

The similar pattern through history in the behaviour of dictatorships suggests that we are dealing with almost a biological mechanism fixed, maybe, by genetically inborn drives. Give neurophysiology a chance: start with a description of drives and motivations in power-sick dictators or bureaucrats. By this knowledge, neurophysiology may unveil their primitive and selfish aims covered by a mantle of "ideology". Who would have thought, that the most depressing material for such "behaviour studies" will be presented by the so called "socialistic society"?



Figure 9
Alexander Dubcek: the leader of Prague Spring.



Figure 10
Gustav Husak: the leader of Prague Winter's "normalization".

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20-12-69

I have been called to the Presidium of the Academy. "Those who maintain their wrong standpoints cannot be directors or members of the academy". Easy, revoke your opinion and all is forgotten. This wholesale revoking is now a routine activity in our society, converting people into opportunists.

10-3-70

Back to my so called "disciplinary proceedings" a week ago. I was surprised by the easy and quiet way I reacted.

Firstly: the most important thing was to know that the people in charge are actually liars and they know it.

Secondly: not admitting or being persuaded to feel guilty...then one gains some supremacy.

Thirdly: this system never gives any explanations to the accused. Uncertainty is their weapon. But by having this knowledge and not expecting any answers, one will stay calmer.

When were the mechanisms of this behaviour pattern born? How old are these mechanisms? So as the fourth point - this can also be a study of human behaviour.

So take it quietly and be a cold observer who may have been asked to write a chronicle.

23.3.70

At the meeting of the district committee: A dry, sharp and relentless woman started: "Comrade, here is a contradiction. You see the mistakes and still you do not have the courage to withdraw". "Look, as a doctor you must have an understanding how abscesses are cleaned and disinfected!"

Too late, instead of taking the initiative and starting the exposure, I am left with just the observations of an irreversible chain reaction, in which they all try to outdo each other in vigilance and party loyalty. Afterwards, I am shocked. The chairman has announced a proposal for my expulsion from the party.

7.4.70

The shock changes to a relief that one is no longer responsible for this devaluation of a party that had such a tremendous appeal to human dignity and hopes. ...I would rather say the party I joined never existed.

15.9.70

...not being allowed to go to congresses or to accept invitations (The Fogarthy Scholarship, the Hamburg congress on steroids, the guest professorship in Konstanz etc). And here I was with, I think, quite an interesting paper on the effect of stretch on heart and skeletal muscle.



Figure 11
Ernest Gutmann, 1969



Figure 12
Ernest Gutmann, 1975, "this chronic uncertainty..."

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As the normalization continued, the stress was building up:

11.11.1976

Yesterday, after two months of waiting, my contract was finally extended. I feel better now, calmer. But that vague fatigue I feel so often is caused by this chronic uncertainty. Is it worth it? But that's just the price I have to pay for being able to continue working.

A great comfort in my father's life was our cottage in the Jizera Mountains in the north of the country. That's where he relaxed, walked the woods and hills, painted and chatted to friends (Figures 13-16). One of the best moments there was the occasion of his 60th birthday, which he described as follows:



Figure 13

Ernest Gutmann's painting of Jizera Mountains

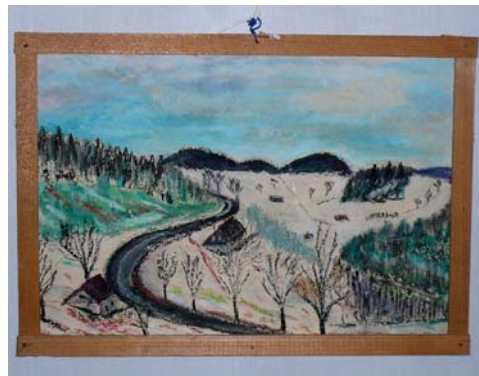


Figure 14

"That's an early Gutmann". Jizera Mountains in winter

15.7.70

Great preparations at the cottage, ... bad time for spiders in all the corners. Scrubbing, washing and preparing. Today the department will come to celebrate my 60th birthday. A bus with a banner ... and all of them with badges "I like Gutmann", and with bread and sausages. A really nice, moving, party. It makes one feel that efforts have not been in vain. The most important department, the department of human relations ... What does one need for happiness? Friends and an atmosphere of understanding onto which one can fall back. A place for home-coming, where power-lines and power-fields retain the continuity of human relations and imprintings.

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Figure 15

Field flowers. “The most important department is the department of human relations...”



Figure 16

Ernest and Malka working at the cottage: ...“Don’t you ever marry a woman with an agricultural background!”

Prof. Zdenek Lodin, my father’s friend and colleague, has written a book of memoirs, which contains many lovely descriptions of various escapades Ernest used to get into. Here is his story about Arnost’s paintings:

His paintings were good or not so good but they had their charm. They used to hang in his apartment and often changed around... Once an English visitor, after his first cup of tea, asked with a great interest: “Who is the painter of this exciting picture? Is he still alive?” And Ernest calmly replied “That’s an early Gutmann”. The guest did not get it and continued staring at the picture. “Extremely interesting, very nice, very nice indeed!” Ernest burst out laughing only after the guest had left.

And here is another one of Lodin’s stories:

The word hobby has a specific meaning: something that should bring a diversion and satisfaction. That was entirely so for Gutmann: if he could not paint in his free time, he became irritable. He used to spend his weekends at the cottage in Jizera Mountains, from where many of his pictures originate. After one beautiful summer weekend, I met him in a very bad mood.

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“What’s the matter? Bad weather or the painting went badly?”

“The weather was lovely but” and after a long pause he said “Zdenek don’t you ever marry a woman with an agricultural background!”

“Why?”

“Well Malka is from a very small village and so the painting had to go down the drain. All day Sunday I had to bundle hay!”

The problem was that Malka had lost her patience and cut the grass herself, demanding Ernest rakes and stacks it. He was deeply distressed that such a pointless task should prevent him from painting (Fig.16).

And finally one more passage from Lodin:

Perhaps modesty, decency and tolerance were the three characteristics that described Ernest best. Words of H.C. Artmann come to mind: “Man can be a poet without ever writing a single verse. The desire to act poetically is enough. This act is far removed from any ambition for recognition and has no material value...”. Gutmann behaved and lived as a poet although he had never written any poem.

Well, I would like to finish with one of the poems that my father has written.
It is called simply “Poems”.



*Figure 17
In Zlata Ulicka (Golden Lane), Prague*

POEMS

*Poems don’t become, they just are
Suddenly in your soul.
Flowing through you
Showing for a brief moment
The glory and greatness of being.
When you consider yourself a poet
You try to contain happiness
In a word
But – poems don’t become,
They just are
Suddenly in your soul.*

Ernest Gutmann