Péter Friedrich, Professor Emeritus and former Director of the Institute of Enzymology, died Wednesday, January 30 in Budapest. He was 76. Péter is survived by his wife and companion Rika, and their two sons Ádám and Balázs.

Péter Friedrich was one of the great biochemists of his generation. He was instrumental in building the reputation of the Institute of Enzymology over a half-century career at this institute.

His departure is a great loss to the scientific community of European biochemists. He was the Chairman of the Federation of European Biochemistry Societies (FEBS) between 1990 and 1993, and active organizer of the life of the Federation as President of the Hungarian Biochemical Society for 15 years. Péter Friedrich organized two FEBS Meetings (1974 and 1990) and one IUBMB Conference (2005) in Budapest, and was awarded with the FEBS Diplome d’Honneur in 2005.

Péter Friedrich was born in Budapest on June 15, 1936. He graduated from the Faculty of General Medicine of Budapest Medical University in 1960 as an MD. As an undergraduate student he joined biochemistry research projects at the Medical Chemistry Institute led by Bruno F. Straub (an internationally acknowledged biochemist, who later became the President of Hungary during the transition period from socialism to parliamentary democracy).

During his university years Péter was granted the gold medal for his research in the Students’ Scholarly Circle and he was eager to continue his work as a scientist. However, in those days of Soviet dominion, research positions were allocated by special committees and political loyalty overruled professional criteria. Péter, who came from a bourgeois family, spoke foreign languages, played the piano (he even made his living during his student years as a bar pianist), wore a tie, was polite, well-bred, well-groomed and full of wit – had practically no chance to get a position at a university research lab. He was told by the woman heading the committee that his presence in an educational institution would be a threat to the Hungarian socialist youth. So, he was assigned a job in a clinical laboratory of the County Hospital in Miskolc, Northeast Hungary.

Thanks to Bruno F. Straub’s personal intervention, two years later he was admitted to the Institute of Biochemistry, a research institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences: his presence there was less dangerous than at a university institute. Péter started to work in the institute as a trainee in 1962 and gradually became “primus inter pares”. In 1990, right after Hungary became a parliamentary democracy and Straub retired, Péter was the obvious choice to become the director.

Péter Friedrich was a devoted researcher with unparalleled scientific integrity, but at the same time he was a respected and active public figure deeply involved in the social life of the Hungarian and international scientific community. Whenever he joined a “club” he was shortly nominated president. He was elected member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1993 and he became the president of the Biology Division of the academy three years later.

The introduction and laudation of newly elected members of the Academy before their inaugural lecture is traditionally the task of the president of the appropriate Division of the Academy. Péter, because of his wit, keen sense of humor and candor created a new “genre” being sincere and kind, witty and serious, personal but not intrusive at the same time.

Péter was elected vice president of the Hungarian Association of Biochemists in 1986; four years later he was the president and stayed in office for 15 years. Thanks to him the Hungarian Association became internationally renowned and he attracted two FEBS Meetings and one IUBMB Conference to Budapest. His personal charm was a major factor in the decisions to award these conferences to Hungary. He was the leading spirit and the driving force in the organizing committees, and his ability in resolving conflicts helped the organizers through most difficulties and tensions.

Although he spent his entire professional life in the Institute of Enzymology (the name of the institute has changed twice during this period of time) on Karolina Street in Budapest, he was a respected member of the international scientific community. He was renowned in the US, Japan, Egypt, and Europe. He had friends from all over the world and visitors populated his laboratory. He spent some time in Oxford between 1975 and 1976, in the Department of Biochemistry.

Péter had the talent to recognize emerging opportunities for new scientific endeavor. He started his research studying individual isolated enzymes to deduce catalytic mechanisms from molecular structures. His first research paper was published in Nature (1964), at a time when the Hungarian scientific community was confined to the “socialist camp” and publications were usually directed to Soviet and domestic journals.

Péter selected the most prestigious scientific periodicals, and – with some naivety – submitted his paper to Nature. The paper was published.

When most biochemists worked on isolated enzymes, he turned to supramolecular organization of enzymes and to the problem of...
metabolic compartmentalization. His pioneering monograph was first published in Hungarian (1982) followed by the English edition (Pergamon Press 1984). Biochemistry of memory and learning was his next endeavor. His paper in *Neurosciences* (1990) “Protein structure: the primary substrate for memory” was an excellent summary of his views. He turned to new challenges every decade during his half century-long scientific career. Protein structure and function, supramolecular organization of enzymes, compartmentalization, functional significance of posttranslational modifications, biochemistry of learning, intrinsically disordered proteins – these were the major fields in which he made significant contributions.

He was not only an exceptional and dedicated scientist whose influence pervaded the field of supramolecular organization of enzymes, biochemistry of learning and memory, but he was also a colleague who was always happy to share his insights and knowledge with fellow researchers and students. All who met him were impressed by his intellect, candor and wit.

It is difficult to comprehend that Peter is gone, but his fingerprint remains on the Institute of Enzymology, on the Hungarian Association of Biochemists and on FEBS as well. His scientific legacy will live on as his students continue research in the spirit established by Péter.

Cicero said: “Mors terribilis iis, quorum cum vita omnia extinguuntur, non iis quorum laus emori non potest”. Indeed death is frightening only for those, for whom with life everything disappears, but not for those who gain immortality through the love, affection and admiration of others. The love and admiration of friends and colleagues will immortalize Péter Friedrich.

Budapest, January 2013.

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