

FROM THE HISTORIAN

The congress medal, Moscow

It is forty years since the only presentation of a Congress Medal (pictured) as the "Congress Prize" was made at the Twelfth International Congress of the Society in Moscow. It was given to a young Russian scientist by the Russian hosts at the evening social reception of that 1969 Congress in recognition of his work on "Preparation of Stabilized Blood Proteins". Lights and cameras were in action for that presentation but not for the next presentation, the award of the ISBT Julliard Prize recognizing a young scientist for his work on the "Immunobiology of Human anti-IgA".

Perhaps all will sense the drama at the first and only Congress held in what was then the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics at the height of what has been called "The Cold War" between the USSR and its former allies. There was a wall dividing the East and West Berlin sectors. The United States had been caught sending its U2 spy planes over Russian territory. Independent Czechoslovakia had just been crushed by Soviet troops. There had been an almost nuclear confrontation between the US and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics over the positioning of Russian missiles in Cuba. Now at the Moscow Congress the Russians had the Prizewinner, and so did the US. The President of the ISBT was Dr. Tibor Greenwalt of the US. The President of the Congress was Dr. A. E. Kisselev of the USSR.

On my way to Moscow, when the airplane landed in Warsaw, two heavily armed men left first to stand at the bottom of the steps, one looking up and one looking out. When we deplaned in Moscow, they were both looking up. Attendees recall a drab city that seemed to be operated by elderly World War II widows who were always present and always observing. Some held the keys to our hotel rooms at stations at the ends of long straight corridors in the brand new 6000 room Hotel Rossiya. I recollect city streets that seemed totally safe all night from any criminal element but yet I wished that my official diplomatic US passport were not being held by the hotel. Additionally, I avoided leaving the hotel with another member of the "Washington establishment" who had shown me, before we left home, the supply of photographic film that had been issued to him. Evidently, I was not worth a visit from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation that interviewed my neighbors a few weeks after I returned home.

After the Berlin Wall came down twenty years later, Dr. Claes Högman described the intrigue that led to the award of the Congress Medal. The ISBT considered it still too sensitive to be published. It took another decade for a more diplomatic version to be recorded by Greenwalt in his *History of the Society* published in 2000. When the Greenwalt Official History was published, Högman shared with me a copy of a letter that he had then sent to Greenwalt with his memory of the details. Their basic stories are the same, differing only in names and timing.



The official winner of that 1969 Julliard Prize was Girish Vyas, a young scientist who had received his doctoral degree in his native India and then worked at the University of California San Francisco in collaboration with Dr. Herbert Perkins and Dr. Hugh Fudenberg. His work had been judged in an advance competition after submission to an international jury that included one Russian. The winner of the Congress Prize was Dr. Valentin Russanov of the Moscow Central Institute of Haematology and Blood Transfusion. He had not submitted his work under the rules for international evaluation but he had been chosen by the hosts of the meeting for the Julliard Prize, without the knowledge of the ISBT.

The Executive Committee of the ISBT learned of the Russian plan when it arrived in Moscow. It refused and the Russians countered with the statement that the Soviet government expected the prize to be given to a Russian and it could close the Congress. The Russian principals would lose their academic positions and the Russian member of the Julliard Prize Committee who had let the fiasco go forward might expect worse.

If a bottle or two of vodka did not help resolve the ensuing four-hour dispute, there is no record. However, after the failed meeting, the ISBT Executive Committee came forward with the compromise proposing the award of two prizes. The Russians agreed and added that the Soviets would legitimize the process by having ten medals struck to establish a host country prize at future Congresses.

The ten medals were produced in time to award the first to Russanov. The next Congress was held in 1972 in the US with Greenwalt as Congress President. As he describes in the *History*, it was the first joint meeting of the ISBT with an established national society and the American Association of Blood Banks had a record of relatively huge, annual meetings in comparison with the activities of the ISBT to that time. It was my role to act for ISBT Scientific Affairs and also as Chair of the Scientific Program Committee for the AABB and to meld the scientific programs. I saw great problems in having the ISBT award a prize to a major host that was providing 85% of the meeting when in most other circumstances the balance of power would be reversed. No Congress Prize was given and none has been given since.

Both Vyas and Russanov continued on to long careers with participation in ISBT activities. Greenwalt turned over to me the nine un-awarded medals when I was appointed to succeed him as Historian of the Society in 1996. I took it upon myself to give one to Greenwalt at his 90th birthday celebration and then to send one to Högman. Thus, shortly before their deaths, they both were reminded of their work in promoting the many activities of the Society that have led to international understanding and harmony. Each of those giants well deserved a Congress Prize.

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