

Memories of Ron Hancock

I met Ron Hancock in 1992. These were difficult times for me, for my family and for my country. There were practically no opportunities to engage in science in Russia at that time. The Soros grant that my boss, Sergei Razin had, was running out, the infrastructure of science was collapsing, scientists were leaving Russia *en masse*. A trip to Canada for a short period of time seemed like a reasonable compromise between family and work interests and the urgent need to somehow earn money. We left in a large group – Razin, his wife Marina, daughter Masha, and me. Ron ran a laboratory at the Quebec Cancer Center and taught at Laval University (taught a two-week course on chromatin and complained about the unbearably heavy teaching load). Apparently, we found ourselves in a short break between grants, since at that time we were the only employees in Ron's laboratory. Then we were joined by a postdoc from Slovakia, a visiting professor from France (R. Miassod), and our compatriot from St. Petersburg, Nikolai Tomilin. Ron was completely different from my idea of "a great scientific boss". He was much older than me and in my ideas about biological ranks occupied a place somewhere between Charles Darwin and Nikolai Vavilov. There was absolutely no snobbery, arrogance, or desire to demonstrate intellectual superiority in him. He was an amazingly gentle, attentive, caring, and charming person. By the way, he also did not fit into our national ideas about prim Anglo-Saxons. Ron was directly involved in the experimental work – he grew the cells, washed the incubator if contamination was suspected, and assembled the newly received devices.

The topic was new to me and not methodically worked out. At first the work did not go well. Razin was restrainedly nervous, I was shaking, Ron alone remained unperturbed and royally calm. In between the bustle of the laboratory, Ron smoked a pipe and sat with his feet on the table in his office, and the very sight of him produced an unusually calming impression. When Sergey and I got the first reasonable results, Ron was not at all surprised, and said that for champions like us everything was bound to work out, he had no doubt in us and now the successful completion of the project was simply a matter of time. From that moment on, he gradually handed over all experimental activities to us, besides, one by one, new collaborators began to arrive who demanded

Ron's participation and attention. Smoking a pipe occupied a very serious place in Ron's life (Phot. 1). The procedure of cleaning the pipe, choosing and stuffing tobacco, lighting up (from 2–3 times it turned out to light up) and actually meditating in clouds of fragrant smoke took a lot of time. I once asked what the main thing in this procedure is – from an organizational and psychological point of view – preparation for smoking or actually smoking. Hancock paused for a long time and then said that the procedure could not be divided into separate parts and only the whole ceremony, carried out slowly, was enjoyable and relieved stress.



Phot. 1. Ron with a pipe.

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Working for Ron was very comfortable – both from a psychological point of view, and from the point of view of work organization. We brought some national specifics to the organization of laboratory life – despite the presence of buffets, a canteen, and a coffee machine within walking distance, we organized evening tea at the workplace. Such habits caused amazement among the surrounding Canadian colleagues; Ron occasionally came to sit and talk with us, but he categorically refused tea. As a child, in England, Ron's morning began with the invariable tea; tea was brewed in Chinese style, adding boiling water to tea leaves that had already been used several times. By the time of the English Five-o-Clock, tea had turned into water, but it was impossible to break tradition and refuse tea drinking; Ron's relatives insisted on strict adherence to this national tradition, even though the tea was tasteless. This childhood trauma permanently switched Ron from tea to coffee, and almost deprived us of his company at tea parties.

Ron not only arranged our work life – he also chose an apartment for me and helped me arrange everything correctly, took care of our Canadian “naturalization” (together with the nice lady from the administration) and entertainment. In fact, Ron also gave us an introductory sightseeing tour of old Quebec. One day, Ron and Sonia invited me to listen to Canadian Christmas carols. Oh, what a hard life it was for the Canadian settlers, oh, what a sad Christmas they had, I thought... In the fall, Ron organized a collective field trip to the University biological station. We walked ten kilometers through a swampy, mossy, lifeless forest, then sat by the fireplace, drinking something very tasty, Ron smoking, the conversation was in French, which was incomprehensible to me, about nothing. I remember all this very much for the cozy atmosphere, true friendliness, and desire to hear each other. Will it come back and when?

For the first time after our arrival, Ron hosted our entire company at his place, which in itself is absolutely amazing, and does not fit into the standard of a boss-subordinate relationship in any way. Ron's house was huge, bright, almost empty, with a spacious kitchen, an outdoor terrace, and a swimming pool. Ron cooked for our whole group exclusively himself, it was very tasty and varied. There was a three-liter bag of wine with a tap on the refrigerator. Ron and Razin regularly used the tap, and apparently that's why the mood was always slightly upbeat. Every day, the leftovers of an uneaten dinner were given to Ron's cats. The cat population lived primarily outdoors and was variable in size. I remember two: one was called Einstein for his exceptional intelligence, the other, it seems, Cleopatra for her rare beauty. Ron took care of the cats' offspring. One day, a cage with a charming kitten and a note “I am looking for an owner and a home” appeared on the refrigerator at the institute. I think this demographic problem was successfully solved, as everything that Ron undertook.

Ron usually got up very early in the morning, at 6 am. He was drinking coffee from a huge mug on the terrace, smoking a pipe and smiling. Next on the schedule was mowing the lawn, breakfast, and heading to work in Ron's car along a very scenic road. Marmots stood as fat columns along the

road, sniffed the air intently and instantly disappeared at any attempt to get acquainted. We did not return early. This carefree life was wonderful.

At the end of the 90s, I worked for some time in Paris, at the Jacques Monod Institute in the laboratory of Klaus Scherer. Our professional environment is quite narrow, everyone knows everyone. Quite suddenly it turned out to me that Klaus and Ron worked for some time in Switzerland in the same laboratory. I had a funny conversation with Klaus about this.

- Klaus: – *You! Worked! with Razin! At Hancock's?*
- I: – *Well, yes.*
- Klaus (indignant puffing): – *Do you realize that he is a true Brit in every sense of the word?*
- Me: – *I'm not sure, he doesn't even like tea.*
- Klaus: – *The main methodological approach then was analytical centrifugation. There was always a queue for the centrifuge. One day I was going to put my samples to spin, I went to the centrifuge with the tubes already balanced. Hancock was leaning on the centrifuge, writing something down. I felt that he felt that I was behind him, but he did not turn around, but continued to write. It's very British. I waited for almost ten minutes. I was furious.*
- A tragic pause –
- Me: – *Klaus, wouldn't it be easier to tap on the shoulder and ask him to move?*
- Klaus: – *Olga, you still don't understand anything. He is British.*

And I still don't understand, the difference in mentality is taking its toll.

Later, we met with Ron several times at conferences, I hope he also remembered our common work with pleasure.

They say war and love are the work of the young. I don't know about the war, but all ages are truly submissive to love. Joanna and Ron met each other in deep maturity and it was a very successful union, a happy marriage with common human and professional interests, a common organized and comfortable life, mutual care and love.

WE REMEMBER AND LOVE RON HANCOCK.