

The brilliant scientist who was too tough to handle

The only reason I became a researcher at CIBNOR is because of Jose Luis. He is solely responsible for my arrival to Mexico and my establishment at CIBNOR. All my memories of him are from the late 80s to mid-90s. Later, our ways separated, mainly because of different temperament, style of management, and topics of study. Even if we shared the same small campus for many years, we were only in infrequent communication for the last decade of his life. On the rare occasions that I visited his spacious office, I was always cordially welcomed and treated well.

I met him by accident. In 1984, I was working as junior scientist at the Weizmann Institute in Israel, a job normally without a future for most young scientists laboring long hours, where one collects all the publications he can obtain for use at a more permanent position elsewhere. In the middle of these hectic days, a Mexican scientist came to visit me from the laboratory of Dr. Shela Gorinshtein in Jerusalem. I had no idea why. He stayed with us for a while and worked with us on developing of a synthetic bacterial inoculant for agriculture, a novel system that he later patented in Mexico. He visited the lab quite a few times, and when he left, he remarked that even if he is just a visitor like many other postdocs there, in Mexico he is a big shot; a head of a division in a federal government institute, called CIB, and if we need something from Mexico, he will always be willing to help.

He was the only Mexican I had met until then, the most generous and polite person, completely different from the commonly rude, down-to-earth Israelis at that time. He was always well dressed, well-behaved, never forgot to bring a gift to the woman of the house whenever he was invited for a dinner. He represented Mexico in Israel extremely well. All women just loved him. He was the perfect, exotic gentleman coming from a country that very few visited. A year later, he organized an international conference on lectins in La Paz, Mexico and asked me to give a talk; one of the first invited talks of my career at international conferences. We also briefly visited CIB during the conference. Then, in 1985, there was not much to see or to appreciate, if you come from an old, very well developed institute that the Weizmann Institute was: a couple of buildings, poorly equipped, labs were located in an ex-hotel frame that was never built and only 11 doctors were working in the four divisions. Jose Luis was a head of a division: Experimental Biology. I was only impressed by the beautiful location on the beach with nothing obstructing the view from the laboratories, different from what it is today. We were in infrequent letter communication afterwards because only airmail letters were common at those days

I saw him again in the depth of winter in 1989 at Ohio State University, where I spend a late post-doctoral period. He just stopped by, I do not remember why or who he was visiting there, surely not me. He came, without previous notice, to our laboratory, which was in the middle of some construction, total chaos. At night, both of us were trapped inside by the most terrible blizzard of the winter. He could not return to his hotel and I could not go home. Spending the night in a deserted lab, with a tremendous storm howling outside, he had asked me “what the hell are we, both from hot countries, doing in such a frozen hell-hole.” I could not agree more. Again with his normal gracious attitude, he invited me to work at CIB, his institute on the beach, an offer without limitation, for any period of time I want. He even promised me, at that frozen night, that my desk will be fronting the beach and the sun always shines in La Paz. All was happened later. I thanked him for such an offer and did not give it additional thought. Compare to what I already had, CIB of that time could not offer me anything exciting for my future career. My life plan was to return to Israel after the postdoc and get a solid research position there. The letters I received from several institutes where I applied for a position were very positive. They were waiting to see what I can contribute. I was sure that I will not have any difficulty to land a position of my liking. Jose Luis left Ohio and I returned to Israel in autumn 1989 to a new world in turmoil.

The Soviet Union started to disintegrate and scores of scientists left it and immigrated to Israel. Suddenly, the competition for jobs was intense and Israel needed to economically sustain this unpredictable population, putting a strain on the country. The jobs I had considered at the Israeli Institute of Technology (Technion) and elsewhere were “frozen solid” until better days. I was told that their funding was diverted to sustain these new immigrants—national priority. In the early months of 1990 the employment situation was getting worse; no positions at all until the economic situation cleared up. I suddenly remembered Jose Luis and his offer. No email at that time. I sent him a telegram and asked if his offer is still valid. All I needed, I wrote, is only a one year temporary position until my “promised” frozen position “thawed”. In the meantime, I can help him in whatever he deemed useful. The telegraph answer came in few days, a resounding “YES”, and I did not think twice. My reasoning was simple. I know the guy from his time as a postdoc in my lab and it was impossible to have a kinder boss and I had time to spare. Whatever I can do in La Paz is better than just waiting in Israel. I can wait in Mexico and whatever I will produce there is an extra merit on my curriculum vitae. I arrived to La Paz in May 1990 straight to his home for a one-year job that has lasted for over two decades.

Jose Luis was the perfect host during my first year of employment, as I expected. With a ridiculously low salary, compare to my previous employments,

no institutional compensation, no SNI bonuses (I was the new guy in town), and coupled with a hostile attitude for no apparent reason, by the local head of administration, I had very little chance of survival if not for Jose Luis. He cleared up the administration menace by dealing with it by himself. With my puny income, I could not afford a car. Daily, for a year, he picked me up at exactly 0730 in the morning from my tiny apartment and we returned to his home to eat late lunch with his wife at exactly 1630. To be exactly on time was a habit he got from his years in Sweden, I assume. He never missed a day.

The “job” that my new Head of the Division assigned to me was ungrateful to say at least; the Head of the Department of Microbiology. The title implies more than what it really was. On the bright side, it had a permanent facility of several labs with some not always functioning equipment. The dark side was it also contained an assortment of tenured researchers, tenured technicians, and volatile population of undergraduate students. None had a doctorate and mostly they were involved in eternal “low intensity conflicts” among themselves on issues I could not understand because none were explained to me. Each researcher was involved in numerous tiny “projects”, none related to other projects of the same researcher or to projects of other researchers. The technicians were free spirits who gave services to their “friends”, but not to their “enemies”. The students were just an uncontrolled herd. The scientific productivity, by any international standard, of that conglomerate was poor to none. The job that Jose Luis gave me was to “fix that department so that it works like a department at the Weizmann Institute”. I could not say no. I volunteered for the job from Israel. The reality I faced was an unanticipated nightmare, even considering that I had visited CIB before for only one hour. It had never been a potential job prospect. There were three other departments in his division, and I knew nothing about them. They had their own problems. Jose Luis had a constant dream from this “impossible-to-fix” division—make it function like similar departments in Europe, where he spent his doctoral time. The job I accepted took seven years of my life to fix. Yet, once the job was completed to the specifications of Jose Luis, the entire Department/Division system of the then newly born CIBNOR was dissolved in 1997 by a new administration and all our work was lost.

We talked for hours about the chronic shortage of researchers in this “nowhere” institute in Mexico. Our sole conclusion was “if you cannot bring them here, make them here”. I am convinced that the idea of creating the graduate school of CIBNOR of today as an incubator for researchers was seeded in these late afternoon conversations after lunch/dinner at his home. He thought that this will be his life goal for a long time; something worth fighting for. I believe that he

never got the real credit for creating the graduate school and running it in its first years. The credit was given to others. He never complained to me.

During our many talks, we even had a master plan to model it on a doctoral program of the University of Lund in Sweden where one former student of Jose Luis was studying. His doctorate served as the template for making a "European doctorate" in the most remote research center of Mexico, including committees with foreign members, long research stays abroad for each student to see "other" scientists at work, no formal "telephone book size" thesis, but rather 3 or 4 publications bounded together in a small booklet, as was the practice in Sweden at that time. I still vividly remember endless fighting in the "Consejo of Postgrado" at that time to promote this vision against the conservative opposition fighting for preservation of the "old school" version of Mexican scholarship. The new ideas did not prevail. It was instituted for a short time. However, after he was ousted by a short-sighted new General Director, the program changed direction completely and ended up in what is the graduate school (Posgrado) of today CIBNOR. While it is true that very few researchers are still trying to maintain the European vision of Jose Luis, it largely disappeared from CIBNOR. I am confident that Jose Luis was not very pleased to see that development.

The job he gave me as head of a very problematic department was the central issue that eventually set us apart. There were two aspects to Jose Luis. One was the perfect gentleman, liberal, open-minded, brilliant that existed only abroad. The other Jose Luis was a very tough administrator who believed in micro-management of everything, from experiments to dress-code of workers and tried to sustain total control of all decisions. This other guy existed solely in Mexico. When I told him that the job he gave me required Herculeaneum efforts and an administrative powers that nobody ever gave me, his response was that "everything is possible in Mexico, given the right justification, and that he will help me". His help was to micro-manage everything I did. While I enjoyed the freedom to do as I pleased because he was concerned that I would not stay, considering he knew quite well my country of origin and the people there, the members of my department did not have my liberties. Each got their activities scrutinized down to the smallest details and when they came to complain to me, I had no recourse but to confront him. Mostly, I failed. I must admit, for me he was too tough to handle.

Nothing good came from continuous confrontation and with time and a new head of the division, our ways parted. He built his own laboratory in the new building for marine pathology that he envisioned and constructed. Toxins of marine plankton was a new field that he found interesting, far from my interests.

He moved to the new building from the defunct Experimental Biology building (later known as Building "J") and we parted for good.

When the basic organizational structure of CIBNOR was dissolved in 1997, we found ourselves in different parts of the new organization, managing completely different research programs, and while he still showed mild interest in microbiology, it was for marine proposes. Jose Luis was a brilliant guy who tried to do too much for Mexico in diverse and separate fields; in this way, his career in science suffered; yet, his brilliance allowed him to switch fields when he thought it was appropriate. His record showed that, in his new field, he was quite productive until he passed away.

We did not cooperate, socialize, or work together for a long time, but I must admit: if not for Jose Luis, my scientific career would have been turned out very differently and probably in another country. For me, there were many positive things that came out of living and working in a very nice area of Mexico. I am eternally grateful; Jose Luis provided significant help when help was urgently needed.

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