

## A retrospective in recent relations with and meetings in Museums for Medical History in East and West Europe

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### Introduction

Apart from the conference meetings, the European Association for Museums for Medical Historical Sciences has had an extra activity since 1993. The aim was to share special skills and do practical work during a workshop. This was an initiative of the late Professor Karl Arons, at the time director of the Riga Paul Stradin Museum for the History of Medicine. His museum was one of the, if not the medical history institute in the former Sovjet Union.

One of the most important aims of our Association is and should be to encourage professionals from medical museums to exchange their knowledge and skills. There are several ways to achieve these objectives. First of all there are the conferences, held every other year. We realize that we have already had 13 in as many locations in Europe. I have enjoyed the privilege of attending all but one (the first). I am convinced that the unique strength of our organization lies in the close companionship and friendship between so many colleagues from all over the world. As said above, another opportunity was added in 1993.

### The new initiative and the link with Riga

After Latvia became independent professor Arons realized the importance and impact of exchanging knowledge and skills between the Eastern and Western European countries. Therefore he asked me to help him (obviously under the auspices of the earlier mentioned Association) to organize a workshop in September 1993. His argument was that he himself had only few contacts in the so-called Western World and I would be useful as having several in various medical historical museums in many European countries. The idea was to invite a number of technicians and/or staff to participate in sharing their skills and experience during this meeting.

About 10 to 15 experts from the East and a similar number from the West of Europe should participate in this smaller scaled event (as compared to the larger conferences).

In 1993, however traditionally well known as a Hanse town that used to have extensive trade relations with the Netherlands and other European countries, Riga was to me a rather exotic place. Yet this was not the only reason that I was happy to be of help. I really thought it would be interesting to meet "new" colleagues, especially from the East of Europe. It would also give us an opportunity to see some equally "new" museums.

Having had my roots in the Anatomy Museum of Leiden, I proposed to discuss and put into practice the conservation of (anatomical and pathological) specimens that are kept in fluid. Right from the beginning Arons was enthusiastic about this suggestion. Thus some 20 participants from at least 7 countries gathered to work together for almost 14 days! Participation fee was quite low as the Paul Stradin Museum was able to finance most activities and even provide accommodation.

The meeting as such was a great success and led to (the installation of) new laboratory facilities in the Riga Anatomy Museum Jēkabs Prīmanis. Several colleagues e. gada Dries van Dam (Leiden Anatomy Museum) and John le Grand (Groningen Anatomy Museum), Susanna Hahn (Deutsches Hygiene Museum) demonstrated their special skills. The Paul Stradin Museum also organized several interesting excursions, so the program was very attractive indeed.

### Following workshops

During this first meeting of its kind it was already proposed to turn these workshops into a tradition and to organize another meeting in two years time. Dr Angele Rudzianskaite, then director of the Anatomy Museum of the Medical University of Kaunas (Lithuania), volunteered to host the next venue.

Subject of discussion during the second workshop was to be: the conservation of dried (bone) specimens. Obviously the Riga museums then were very well represented e. gada by Mrs Dr Rūta Lindberga, who was very much involved in Physical Anthropology and skeletal research. How happy she was when we were able to present her with a pair of spreading calipers to be used with and for her scientific work.

This second workshop in Kaunas (1995) was also very successful and two years later another workshop was held in Minsk, Belarus.

Dr Tatyana Svetlovich, director of the Belarus History of Medicine Museum was our host. Since then the workshops have been alternating with the general conferences, in Riga again, St. Petersburg, Wroclaw and last year once again in Kaunas.

During these workshops several other themes were discussed and carried out. In Minsk (1997) medical instruments were cleaned and their rust removed. In the second Riga-meeting (1999) anatomical models were restored and/or cleaned. In St Petersburg (2001), work was done on the famous Ruysch anatomical collection

in the well know *Kunstkamera* (Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography of the Academy of Science) under the supervision of curator Anna Radzyun. In Wrocław (2003) (organized by Prof. Wanda Wojtkiewicz-Rok) attention was paid to several collections in the field of anatomy, pharmacy, pathology and forensic medicine (Prof. Thadeus Dobosz). Last year's meeting in Kaunas (2005) was dominated by research on the so-called "bulky" instruments and the problems of collecting, cleaning and presenting these objects. Dr Tauras Mekas and his team proved to be enthusiast organizers and skilled demonstrators.

Another result of these contacts was that some newly acquainted colleagues were invited to come over to Utrecht for a trainee period. These periods lead to real close and long lasting friendships. Thanks to the splendid initiatives of Dr Zeljko Dugac and his colleagues the next workshop will be held in Zagreb from 20 till 23 of June 2007. The focus will be on the collection and preservation, as well as on the restoration, processing and evaluation of objects related to traditional (folk) medicine in the older European societies. We very much look forward to this event.

Financing these meetings was not always as easy as it was at first. We cannot thank the Board of the Stradin Museum in Riga enough for their solid and enthusiastic support. We are also very grateful to the Medical Department of the National Museum of American History in Washington DC (Dr. Ray Kondratas) which donated generously, not only financially but also in practical support. Furthermore, the Dutch Prins Bernard Foundation was kind enough to help, especially the participants from the East European countries. The Utrecht University Museum contributed where possible and finally our own organization (EAHMS) took its own responsibility in this matter. Nevertheless it has always been a struggle to make the financial ends meet. For the fact that there are now new possibilities for the next workshop we also thank the several local and even private sponsors.

One could conclude that the initiative to organize these workshops has been constructive and successful; it is clear that Riga has had an important spill function in these meetings.

### **Other contacts with the Riga Medical History Museums**

It is no surprise that I was very much impressed by the extensive and interesting collections, exhibits and diorama's in the Paul Stradin Museum and its affiliates, the Anatomy Museum Jēkabs Pīmanis and the History of Pharmacy Museum. E. gada striking to me was and still is the impressive collection of (medical) books from Dutch origin, dating back to the 16th, 17th and 18th century. No doubt there must have been a relation between this remarkable collection and the city of Riga, being a Hanse town with extensive ties with the Netherlands. I do hope an opportunity will arise in the not too far future to do some more (historical) research on the collection and eventually set up an exhibition around this theme.

Also impressive is the collection on Space Medicine. In the displays an interesting review is given around the early Russian Space program. To me the

"space" food, hygienic devices and special costumes present a new picture of modern developments in this field. The stuffed dog (Dunya?) and its cage are clearly visible at display. In the last years, or I may say during the several times in 15 years that I have visited the Paul Stradin Museum, I have been astonished to see its enormous expansion and renovation power, resulting in new exhibits and activities. Time and again the new exhibits, diorama's and renovations made these visits a new and interesting experience.

In 1995 a temporary exhibition developed by the Utrecht University Museum, "Corpora Nova", a display and layout of the human body and the dangers of risky habits in life, became available. After presentation in the museum for some months it also traveled through the Netherlands for about a year and a half. The University Museum was moving to its new location and the exhibitions as such were to be taken down and became available for third parties. By accident I discussed this matter with Dr Juris Salaks and he was quite eager to take over the exhibition. So in 1997 the better part of it was transported to the Riga Paul Stradin Museum. The texts were translated into the Latvian language and a few months later with some adaptations it was officially opened by the State Minister of Health of Latvia, Dr Viktors Jaksons. We were very proud to have been of service and help with this project which I believe contributed tremendously to the already close relationship between the two museums.

But this was by no means the last activity that we undertook. In 1999 the Paul Stradin Museum asked the Utrecht University Museum if it could borrow a collection of photographs that had recently been discovered in one of the cellars of the Utrecht Academic Hospital. It is a collection of clinical pictures of the late 19th and early 20th century and assembled by the professors A. Narath (1864–1924) and Hiddo Jan Laméris (1872–1948). On the base of a loan, around 50 of these pictures were exhibited under the title: "Dramatic Medicine". Dr Sergej Savenko, curator of the Modern Medical History Department, added a collage of specimens dealing with similar patients. This exhibition had officially been opened by Mr Nicolaas Beets, at the time Ambassador of the Netherlands in Latvia. I was proud to be there and enjoyed the warm hospitality of Latvia and its capital.

To me the latest meeting of the Association in Riga in August (2006) was unforgettable. Not only were the contributions very interesting, they were also well structured and guided. The organization, dealing with so many people and so many wishes, was perfect and the staff very patient and more than helpful.

Right now I am looking forward to new events and I wonder when and where these will take place.

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