The recently written booklet by Oksana Zayachkivska and her co-authors Iryna Kovalchuk and Maryana Savytska regarding the history of the Normal Physiology department of Lviv’s National Medical University turned out to became the story of its leaders, the heads of the department, and their achievements. It is written in Ukrainian and English and beautifully illustrated with pictures and drawings representing the spirit of the different episodes. The history of any faculty in the west part of Ukraine and in particular the Physiology faculty of the University of Lviv, which celebrates now its 125 anniversary, can only be considered in the framework of the turbulent political and societal situation and the dramatic changes that have taken place in this timeframe and in particular in this part of Europe. And this makes an exciting story.

The University of Lviv, the capital of East Galicia, founded by the Habsburgian emperor Joseph II in 1784 decided only more than 100 years later, in 1895, 40 years after the foundation of Physiology chairs in many West-European countries, to have a Physiology department; the first director was Adolf Beck, trained at Jagiellonian university In Krakow, one of the recognized pioneers of the recording of the electrical brain activity EEG, in particular the localization of senses in the brain and the so-called desynchronization response upon sensory stimulation. Beck was a locally well-recognized scientist and teacher, and he and his former teacher and friend Napoleon Cybulski, physiologist and endocrinologist at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, published in 1915 the influential monograph Handbook of Physiology. The Polish Physiology School dominated this period, rather independent from the famous St Peterburg school of Physiology, chaired by the great Ivan Pavlov. The faculty in Lviv had many good years under Beck’s inspiring leadership, there were many contacts with other Polish universities, the teaching and research were only interrupted by the First World War, followed by the two years’ war between Poland and Ukrainian nationalists. Beck retired as head of the department in 1937. After the Second World War the east part of Galicia with Lwów, now Lviv, was annexed by the Soviet Union. This had major consequences since the Soviet regime in Moscow under the great leadership of Joseph Stalin broke since 1950 completely with western physiological concepts including the Polish school as developed by western «idealist» electrophysiologists as Sherrington, Lashley, and Fulton. It caused also a shift in the domains that were studied in Lviv: electrophysiological research towards brain function was abandoned and a period of isolation was started by the Soviet regime-controlled science. An isolation period lasting 40 years started regarding having no contacts with western scientists and not having access to Western scientific literature. And there was the Soviet obligation to publish in Russian. For the physiologists, the adagio was that only a return to Pavlov’s road (Glory to Pavlov’s genius) that physiology should be most effective, most beneficial to the people, and most worthy to the building of Communism. Higher-order, cognitive processes were studied and considered only in the framework of conditioned reflexes.
Psychiatric and neurologic illnesses were considered as a disturbed balance between excitation and inhibition. Moscow dictated also the curriculum of all medical schools throughout the whole Soviet Union and within the domain of Physiology Pavlov's concept 'nervism' was dominating.

On the other hand, the financial support from Moscow in the communistic period was not bad, the salaries of professors were excellent. Research support was good, among others through the advocating contributions of the Ukrainian physiologist Prof Platon Kostuk, Director of the Physiology Institute A.A. Bogomolets in Kyiv. He was a distinguished scientist not only in the USSR but also abroad. Kostuk was an excellent lobbyer for the Ukrainian scientific community and therefore many studies were supported financially by Moscow in the communistic period.

The first head of the Physiology department under the Soviet regime was Yakiv Pavlovych Sklyarov. It is not clear whether he was appointed because of his name, anyway, under his supervision conditioned reflexes were studied, as well as that other research was aimed towards the digestive system, including absorption processes in the intestines, all contributing to the glory of the socialistic state. Neither from him nor his successor, Eugen M Panusuk, Google scholar brought up English publications, implying that the studies were done in the department only contributed to the glory of the Soviet Union. When this author had the opportunity to visit the Dept of Normal Physiology in Lviv in 1996, we needed an English-Russian-Ukrainian interpreter to talk to Prof. Panusuk, illustrating the internal directed face of (Physiological) science in the past times. Research at the Department of Normal Physiology was in those days oriented towards toxicology, environmental hazards, industrial problems, effects of laser radiation and doses of radiation, as well as an increase of capacity, endurance, and recovery of the central nervous system.

The collapse of the Soviet union in 1991 caused a dramatic reduction in support and resources for the last ten years of Panusuk's leadership, and many young scientists and doctors tried to find a better future abroad. On the other hand, the renewed freedom to teach in the Ukrainian language pushed Panusuk to translate and write many textbooks for students into Ukrainian. The next leader, M R Grzegotsky was, besides an academician, also a catholic, and his appointment witnesses the changing times. The topic of the experimental studies at the institute was not immediately changed, they continued in the traditions of the laboratory by emphasizing the study of the digestive system under extreme environmental circumstances. His achievements, as summarized in the booklet, seem numerous and endless, although again very little of his works can be found in PubMed, only a single English paper. It seems, therefore, that there is still the tradition to publish in Ukrainian, instead of in English in an attempt to contribute to openness. It is amusing to read and sense, that near the end of the booklet, the enthusiasm about new possibilities caused by a much more open atmosphere meets the reader and drips from the pages, although the achievements of the last two leaders, including the current one and first author of the booklet, are getting too much attention. I would be curious to learn in what direction the department is developing regarding its research. However, Ukraine and its Danylo Halytsky Lviv National Medical University are much more open than it has been in the past due to the terror in the Nazi and Soviet period. And let us hope that this openness and orientation to the outside scientific world will continue to grow and that in the next 25 years they will become a genuine Ukrainian and European university according to any standard.

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March, 12, 2021