

Report on the shipment of instruments and journal volumes to countries of the former East Block

In the wake of my retirement from “active university service” my chair of biochemistry was to be dissolved. Only a few of the still operative instruments in my laboratories were claimed by the other professors of our institute including my successor. Therefore several instruments became available for donation to institutions outside our university. Rather than ultimately scrap them I decided to donate them to needy institutes in countries of the former East Block. The heads of these laboratories had formerly asked me on several occasions if our institute had functional instruments that would no longer be needed locally. On my inquiry the heads of these laboratories confirmed their ongoing interest in instruments from our institute. Simultaneously they stressed that they had no funds to pay for the transport of the instruments from Tuebingen/Germany to their countries.

I submitted a grant application to CAEN requesting funds for financing the transport of the instruments to the destinations St. Petersburg/Russia, Martin/Slovakia, and Yerevan/Armenia. The amount of grant money asked for was based on quotations received from the only transport company in the Tuebingen area that regulatory serves destinations in the former East Block (Betz). On request by the Chairman of CAEN, Dr. Francisco Barrantes, the heads of the three institutions, Drs. Natalya Avrova/St. Petersburg, Dusan Dobrota/Martin, and Gevorg Gevorkian/Yerevan, submitted statements on the envisaged use of the instruments. CAEN approved of the grant application. Subsequently the grant sum of Euro 4970 was transferred by the office of the ISN Treasurer, Dr. David Shine, to an account at the University of Tuebingen.

After the grant money had arrived I was informed by the transport company on the pieces of information they needed to carry out the transport. These items were:

- Exact designations, numbers and weights of the instruments.
- Exact names and postal addresses of the receiving institutions, and name(s) and telecommunication addresses of the person in charge of receiving the instruments in the respective institutions.
- Name and address of the pertinent customs office in the city which the respective receiving institute is located in.
- Copy of a formal invoice that I would send to each of the receiving institutes saying what would be donated and why, describing exactly the items that were going to be donated and the prices these institutions would be charged for these items. Each of these formal invoices contained a total symbolic price of 1 Euro.

The transport company had stated in their bid that they were neither responsible for packing of the instruments nor for transport of these items within the institute building. Therefore, and since the institute elevator is too small to accommodate the instruments, the grant application had already contained the quotation of another transport company (Walter) for moving the instruments from an upper floor of the institute to the basement where the instruments were to be picked up.

I had sent my request for the above mentioned information to the heads of the recipient laboratories. Subsequently, I received an e-mail (attachment 1) and a telephone call from Dr. Natalya Avrova in St. Petersburg who told me that they had to decline the donation. She informed me the local customs office had instructed them that on arrival the instruments would be stored under the custody of a local logistics company during the period of customs work on them. The analysis by the customs office could take 10-14 days and the storage costs could amount up to US\$ 130 per day. Dr. Avrova said their institute could not come up with so much money and, therefore, they had to revoke their wish to receive the instruments as a gift from our university. It is obvious that this upsetting experience of the St. Petersburg colleagues is just another example illustrating the corruption of public services in Russia. Subsequently Dr. Dusan Dobrota from Martin/Slovakia gladly accepted my offer to also receive the instruments originally earmarked for St. Petersburg.

During this period it also became obvious that the space in my much smaller emeritus office (in comparison to the office for the chair in biochemistry) could not accommodate some of my privately owned journal volumes. Thus, I offered to donate my collections of J. Neurochem. and Int. J. Dev. Neurosci. to the director of the Institute of Neurochemistry in Yerevan, Dr. Gevorg Gevorgian. He gladly accepted the offer, especially since the acceptance was not accompanied by having to pay the transport bill. This also applied to the transport of additional instruments to Martin/Slovakia. Since the transport to St. Petersburg was cancelled, some of the money envisaged for it was now used to defray the costs for sending the additional items to Martin and Yerevan.

The transport of equipment to Martin/Slovakia worked without any adverse events and the instruments arrived in good shape on June 12th, 2008. In contrast, the shipment to Armenia turned out to become a strenuous enterprise. First, the truck got stuck somewhere at the shore of the Black Sea for more than a week, since the ferry to Georgia that operates every 10 days was defunct and up for repair. Then the Abchasian war started and it became uncertain whether the truck would be allowed to pass through Georgia on its trip to Armenia. Eventually the transfer of instruments was successfully concluded when the truck reached Yerevan on July 23rd, 2008.

The dynamics of restructuring our institute and of replacing the retiring professors by younger colleagues coming from various other German universities brought about considerable unexpected turmoil. One such unexpected event was that one of the horizontal laminar flow hoods from my laboratory which one of the young faculty members had opted for could not be accommodated in the very limited space the institute had provided him with. Therefore he made the hood available for donation to an outside institute. Since in the meantime I had received a request for surplus cell culture equipment from Prof. Magda Melkonyan, Department of General and Bioorganic Chemistry, Yerevan State Medical University, I offered this hood to her. The bid from the local transport company allowed to finance from the CAEN grant also this second transfer of equipment to another institution in Yerevan. Therefore, also this transfer was launched and the hood arrived well in Yerevan on September 11th, 2008 (Prof. Melkonian informed me by telephone of the arrival).

In summary, the grant money was spent as shown in attachment 4. Of the Euro 4970 granted an amount of Euro 145.52 is left on the account of the University of Tuebingen. This money will be returned to the ISN Treasurer.

During my service as an ISN Officer Council had launched a program of financial support for the transfer of used, still functioning instruments from donating institutions to needy laboratories in deprived countries. Although much hailed by many ISN members, the program turned out as a complete flop. Not a single application was received. Some colleagues confided to me that it was the red tape and the envisaged enormous expenditure of time that had prevented them from applying. I can now state from my own experience that this anticipation was correct. But I would like to state that the transfers from our institute just undertaken in the last half year should be taken as a proof of principle that such transfers can be successful. This should be looked at by colleagues as an encouragement to follow this paradigm.

I should like to thank the members of CAEN and its Chairman, Dr. Francisco Barrantes, for their understanding and their constructive help in this transfer of used but still functioning equipment to needy laboratories. Included in these thanks are also the Officers of ISN. The heads of the recipient groups in Armenia and Slovakia will probably express their gratitude separately.

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