
In Memoriam



Dr. Albert Zlatkis (1924–1998)

I have been asked by the Journal of Chromatography to write an “In Memoria” to Dr. Albert Zlatkis since he has had such a close relationship with the journal and its publisher, Elsevier, who published many of the International Symposia on Advances in Chromatography Proceedings and several books. I am honored to have this opportunity, but, on the other hand, it is a difficult task since Al was such a close friend and I miss him greatly.

In my opinion Al Zlatkis has contributed more to chromatography than any other person. This was primarily through his creation and administration of the International Symposia on Advances in Chroma-

tography that started in 1963 and covered a span of 25 years, which was a critical period in the development of chromatography. A few of us old-timers remember the status of chromatography in 1963 when there were very few commercial units, but lots of ideas in a budding technology. The Symposia on Advances in Chromatography served a critical function to get scientists throughout the world together annually for a week or so to discuss the many new topics.

Dr. Zlatkis insisted that the review process of these presentations be thorough, but prompt so that the proceedings could be published at the time or

shortly after the Symposium. This facet in itself speeded up the development of chromatography in that it hastened the exchange of ideas at a much greater rate than the usual procedure of journal publication that we know can take up to a year. Dr. Zlatkis' vision of alternating the Symposia between the USA and Europe and Asia was brilliant in that it automatically made it truly "International". To my knowledge this is the first time that this had been carried out and is now duplicated by other Symposia.

Dr. Zlatkis made a great effort to be aware of chromatographic research throughout the world and to encourage its presentation. This is what made the International Symposia on Advances in Chromatography so important, even encouraging the discussion of highly controversial subjects. In addition he encouraged researchers, as myself, into working in areas that may benefit from that person's expertise. The field of chromatography is unique in that researchers from numerous disciplines have made contributions that were essential to the development of chromatography. Dr. Zlatkis encouraged the participation of newcomers as well as old-timers to participate in the Symposia. To my knowledge Al had no prejudices in regards to presentation and participation according to nationality, race etc. In fact he even went out of his way, and was successful, in getting participation from researchers behind the Iron Curtain – and in those days that was no small task.

Many years ago when Al was being nominated for various awards, he asked me to write him a letter of recommendation. I started writing the letter citing his numerous accomplishments and then I thought this was going to be long, drawn out, and boring to the reader. I decided to take the opposite approach which I think gives a truer evaluation of a person's accomplishments: Let's take away everything that has his name on it or in which he was the instigator and see what affect this would have had on prior scientific development. Well in Al's case it was obvious that excluding his contributions would have a devastating effect on the development of chromatography, and at that time, more so than from any other individual. Al thought the letter was inspirational and requested to use it in all of his nominations, which to my knowledge were always successful in his receiving the award.

Dr. Zlatkis was born on 27 March, 1924 in Pomorzany, Poland and emigrated at the age of three with his parents to Toronto, Canada. He attended the University of Toronto and received his B.A.Sc. degree in Chemical Engineering in 1947 and his M.A.Sc. degree in 1948. He attended graduate school at Wayne State University and received his Ph.D. degree in 1952. He then accepted a position at Shell Oil Company in Houston. He taught part-time at the University of Houston and later accepted an Assistant Professor position in 1955. He was elected Chairman of the Chemistry Department in 1958 and was instrumental in hiring me in 1959.

In those days the department was small and we all knew each other closely. I was located in the attic of the Science Building at that time and Al had a "Burrell" gas chromatograph operating there and that was my first introduction to gas chromatography. In 1961 Al invited Dr. Jim Lovelock to come to the University of Houston to further develop the electron-capture detector in conjunction with the newly developing capillary columns. Again one can see the insight that Al had in the collaboration with Dr. Lovelock and the development of this technology.

Dr. Zlatkis has had numerous graduate students who had the additional benefit of meeting the pre-eminent scientists throughout the world at the Chromatography Symposia. There have been more than 200 research publications arising from research in Dr. Zlatkis' laboratory. He is a co-author of an organic text: *A Concise Introduction to Organic Chemistry*, and a co-editor of numerous books including: *Electron Capture-Theory and Practice*, *75 Years of Chromatography-A Historical Dialogue*, *The Practice of Gas Chromatography*, *Preparative Gas Chromatography*, and *High Performance Thin-Layer Chromatography*.

Dr. Zlatkis received the American Chemical Society Award in Chromatography in 1973, The NASA Distinguished Science Award in 1978, the NASA Technology Award in 1975 and 1980, and the Chromatography Commemorative Medal of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1980. In 1985 he received the Distinguished Texas Scientist Award from the Texas Academy of Science and in 1988 the Southwest ACS Regional Award and shortly thereafter the Southeast Texas ACS Regional Award.

Despite all his accomplishments, Dr. Zlatkis' greatest legacy is his relationship with friends, colleagues, and particularly his graduate students. He set the tone that research was fun and exciting and this came through to his very active research groups throughout his career at the University of Houston. Last year we had a retirement party for Dr. Zlatkis and we invited all of his former graduate students to attend and participate in a mini-symposium that we had in his honor. Many of his former students attended this function but some had to send their regrets due to prior commitments or health problems. The enthusiasm of those in attendance was awe-inspiring and a tribute to Al's enthusiasm about research. Al was an experimentalist and encouraged students to go into the laboratory and "try it". His famous statement was "Don't make the first experiment too perfect or it probably won't work". His students respected Dr. Zlatkis on a professional basis, but were endeared to him on a personal level. There was always a loyalty and trust between Al and his graduate students and Post-Docs that still persists today. He frequently went out of his way to assist them in their professional pursuits. Recently I attended a professional meeting and met one of his former students from several years past. The student was quite successful in his position and he said he owed it all to Dr. Zlatkis. Before the student went on his first interview, Dr. Zlatkis informed him what to expect and to be certain he dressed in a suit and tie.

The student explained that he could not afford a suit, where upon Al took him out and had him fitted for a suit and all the associated paraphernalia. The student obtained an offer for the position but shortly after accepting the offer his car broke down and not worthy of repair. In order for the student to get to his employment, Al took him out and bought him a car. There was no formal transaction concerning the finances, but the student insisted on paying Dr. Zlatkis back. Al's only comment was: "When you get back on your feet, you might consider repaying me, but don't worry about it". This, I think illustrates Al's devotion to his students and his desire for their success.

Even though Al was kind and thoughtful he was very strong-willed and could handle set backs as we frequently encounter in research. During the last few months of his life I visited him frequently in the hospital and he remained interested in our research and always positive in his attitude and towards life in general. When he received the bad news from the diagnosis, I will always remember his statement: "Well, that's Show Biz" and he said it without remorse. He passed away on 16 January 1998.

Well Al we all miss you dearly and there's an emptiness down here without you. I don't know where you are but if you have a gas chromatograph at your side, I know you went to heaven.

Houston, TX, USA

W.E. Wentworth