

A Lifetime since Lysekil (An after dinner address by Larry Curtis)

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A while ago Indrek and I were reminiscing over our long collaboration, and we asked ourselves, “Where did those 35 years go?” We then looked at our research papers and we also asked, “Where did all those papers come from?”

All of this started in the fabled 1960’s. In the US, every century had its 60’s (in the 1760’s, unrest led to the Revolutionary War; in the 1860’s, unrest led to the Civil War; the 1960’s, unrest led to Beam Foil Spectroscopy). As Sir Paul McCartney has said, “If you can remember the 1960’s, you weren’t there!”

As the 1960’s were pulling to a close, there was a unique collaboration at the University of Arizona. Stanley Bashkin, Bill Bickel, Indrek Martinson, Gordon Berry, Jürgen Andrä, Jean Desesquelles, Dick Schectman, and others were all at the same place at the same time. In June 1970, this was punctuated by the Second International Conference on Beam-Foil Spectroscopy in Lysekil Sweden.

At that time I was somewhat disillusioned with research, finding it a lonely and frustrating endeavor, and was about to accept the job of being Department Chairman at the University of Toledo. Dick Schectman returned from his Sabbatical Leave in Tucson, and persuaded me that I must take a Sabbatical before I consented to a life of futile bureaucracy, and he suggested that I contact the labs in Stockholm and Lyon. I did, and received invitations from both, the second worst situation one can be in. The worst situation is to have no offers, the best situation is to have one offer, which is then the optimal choice. With two offers you must weigh and decide.

On their way back to Sweden, Indrek and Evi stopped off in Toledo to visit Dick. Indrek and I hit it off immediately, and we agreed on the spot that I would attend the Lysekil meeting and stay on for a Sabbatical year in Sweden. The next part of the story I pieced together only later, from other sources. Apparently there was a funding crisis in Stockholm, and the money that they had tentatively offered to me had disappeared. Indrek was instructed to contact me and to explain that my visit to Stockholm would not be possible after all. Anyone who knows Indrek also knows that he did not follow those orders. Instead he took a leave-of-absence from his own position, made his salary available to me, and sought and obtained an outside teaching job for himself (thus restricting his own research time).

I came to Sweden, became involved in an exciting research endeavor with inspiring collaborators who are here tonight, and I met a beautiful, intelligent, kind Swedish girl whom I married, and have been returning to Sweden ever since. I often wonder what would have happened if Indrek had not been Indrek. Perhaps I would have gone to Lyon, become involved in exciting research, married a beautiful, intelligent, kind French girl, and returned to France every year for 30 years. I doubt that. It is more likely that I would have returned after one year to a life of shuffling papers as a middle level bureaucrat in a small university.

It was also a pleasure to watch Indrek’s rise. I was second opponent at his doctoral disputation, and saw him move from being a researcher to occupying the Professor’s Chair formerly held by Rydberg and Edlén. He also rose to become the chair of the Physics Section of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and supervised the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Physics. He has received numerous international honors, but the one that pleased me the most was when he returned to the city of his birth, Tartu Estonia, to receive an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Tartu.

One aspect of Indrek’s personality is particularly worthy of note here. I’ve heard an apocryphal story about the retirement of another Swedish Professor. His Institute held an elaborate party on the occasion. When the “Kaffe and Kaka” and the handshaking were completed, the Professor walked out into the sunlight, and heard a huge crashing sound. He looked back and saw his research equipment being thrown out of a third floor window into a dumpster below. There was no report of his former graduate students being thrown out of the window, but one might question the future of their research projects. This is not special to Sweden – I have seen many new brooms sweep laboratories clean in the US.

When Indrek arrived at Lund as Bengt Edlén’s successor, he had two goals. One was to establish a program of time-resolved atomic structure measurements in parallel with and complementing the high wavelength resolution program that was already in place. The second was to obtain permanent positions for all of the researchers who had worked with Edlén who desired to continue at the Institute.

There are many of us who owe Indrek a deep debt of gratitude, which is not easy to express in normal conversation. However, this is a very fitting occasion for us all to think of and express that gratitude.

At this time I would like to salute Professor Emeritus Indrek Martinson, who is an Eminent Scientist, and while he is a ruthless tactician on the chessboard, he is a great Humanitarian on the Chessboard of Life.

