

Zeiselmauer – at my home –, December 31, 2001

Rattlebrain or Battered Brain? A posttraumatic experience with one's own central organ

*Au fond des ténèbres,
Dans ces lieux funèbres,
Combattons le sort:
Et pour la vengeance,
Tous d'intelligence,
Préparons la mort.*

[Gérard de Nerval: Chœur souterrain. Petits châteaux de Bohême, poésies et souvenirs. Paris, nrf Gallimard, 1974]

Friday, December 7, saw me in Paris again, for the history session of the *Journées* and the 'Lunch des Orateurs'. I bought some poems of Nerval which I did not possess yet (vide supra). I had left my home at 5.30 h and came back shortly before midnight, just to jump onto my bike next morning (Saturday) as I have been used to, for 52 years by now. The only regular activity I pursue for a longer period of time other than studying and practising medicine. I guess I covered about a hundred fifty thousand miles during these five decades all over the place, an activity which may have come to an end, *possibly or perhaps?* Doing several thousand miles per year you hit the ground about once per annum – more often in good years, one could remark cynically. So far, I had three major accidents due to oil spills, road construction, ice etc. with some grave consequences (many of my colleagues may remember that). One at least, which changed my life dramatically and brought me back from Jerusalem to Vienna and into the history of medicine.

On December 8 – in Austria still a (catholic) holiday – a careless driver disregarded the respective traffic sign, did not 'yield' but slapped onto the accelerator when I was within a few meters of his hood – and catapulted me into the air. It would be utterly inelegant to enumerate all the contusions, distortions and fractures I suffered. The moment my head was smashed onto the road, by whiplash effect, let a flash of thought cross my brain, namely that this must have some lasting consequence (next to the two teeth it cost, bitten off by myself that moment). Three woolen caps softened the impact. Helmets are not available for hydrocephalic skulls with 64 cm circumference).

The subsequent 20-odd days since became the most sobering, painful, frustrating, sleepless in my 65 years. Back from surgery, from hospital and from infusions and the like, my younger son drove me over for the first time, to meet my sister on X-mas Day – only to find out that I now become afraid of every oncoming car on the road.

And how did I – do I – spend the endless hours, practically immobilized in my home? Writing left-handedly (literally) on the PC, finishing a sizeable manuscript on the history of our society, approving a 400-page PhD thesis on one of the medicobotanical treasures of the Institute and – embarking on a 'new' topic, sitting in my head for quite some years. Work, after all, is the only 'remedy' for frustrated overactive people like myself, all the more if tortured by pain all day long. But this is not the point I want to make, just the background. 'Le clou' is to follow.

The above work finished, I did some brainstorming what possibly could fill the days till the first cast is going to be removed or till I may be able to drive a car again, weeks ahead. I arrived at a topic which had been on my mind already but postponed for some trivial reasons year after year: the history of the Auspitz phenomenon. With enthusiasm I jumped on that and started to draft a manuscript. Short it should be because the allowance I have for such topics is very limited. After half a day of feverish work I suddenly had doubts about the topic, and some faint memory of having dealt with it in detail surfaced in my brain. I asked my wife if she remembered. The answer was inconclusive because she remembered my speaking about it, but not having seen or read a draft. The next rational thing would have been to ask my collaboratrice of recent times, in Croatia. She, however, was 'incomunicado' due to X-mas holidays. Eventually, becoming not only feverishly busy with a topic, but also irritated about my memory, I started to do what I should have done in the first place: I sifted through my drafts, files and manuscripts of the recent past and, to my unpleasant surprise, found a completed draft on this subject, already sent to the editor – receipt confirmed [1]. Checking the date, I realized that this had been just days before the accident. *My brain did not work properly as I was used to, so far at least.* The commotion I suffered must have caused a *battered brain*, and this last-minute discovery prevented me from becoming a *rattlebrain* with all the ensuing embarrassment it may have caused.

A very sobering experience, indeed.

(Incidentally the collaboratrice mentioned above is co-author on the small story. How much would that have made me feel ashamed, had I reached and asked her. A grisly imagination.)

Age or trauma, or both? Some subject anyway to devote careful consideration to, in the future.

Reference

- Holubar K, Fatovic-Ferencic S: Papillary tip bleeding or the Auspitz phenomenon: A hero wrongly credited and a misnomer resolved. Submitted.

à bientôt,

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