

Old Yellow Seine

Toward the end of my career as a laboratory scientist, I was invited to participate in a symposium held in Mol, Belgium, in June of 1971. The title of the symposium was *Biology and Radiobiology of Anucleate Systems*. For a number of years, I had been involved in studies on the molecular biology of events in the development of the leopard frog. Some of those studies had focused on the role of the nucleus in early embryogenesis, and they included studies on oocytes (eggs) in which the nucleus had been removed. Hence, my invitation to this particular symposium. The title of my paper was: *The Regulation of Protein Synthesis in Anucleate Frog Oocytes*. Although this story is not so much about the science that took me to Belgium as about the trip itself and some of the people I encountered that week, I will offer this photo from the symposium proceedings showing how I removed the nucleus from a frog oocyte.

I did not show the magnification in this micrograph, but the oocyte shown is slightly more than 1/16 of an inch in diameter, so this process can be aptly considered microsurgery. Other manipulations in the experiments involved similarly small sizes and quantities, although the nucleus shown in the photo would be considered very large when compared with nuclei in most somatic cells.

This symposium was not a large event (less than 100 participants, including 12 speakers) and less than half a dozen from the U. S., so it didn't take me long to meet and befriend Syd Craig, who was the only other speaker on the program who was an American. Syd and I hit it off well and became essentially inseparable for the rest of the time I was in Europe.

The symposium was held—and we were housed—at the Centre d'Etude de l'Energie Nucléaire in Mol, which was the Belgian equivalent of the Argonne National Laboratory in the U.S., an Atomic Energy facility where I was employed at the time. To get to the site of the symposium, I had to fly from Chicago to London and then to Brussels, where I think I was picked up by someone from the Center. It was perhaps forty miles from the airport to Mol. My cross-cultural education began at the airport. There I discovered that cleaning ladies in public bathrooms in Belgium make no distinction as to the gender of the occupants. You could be using

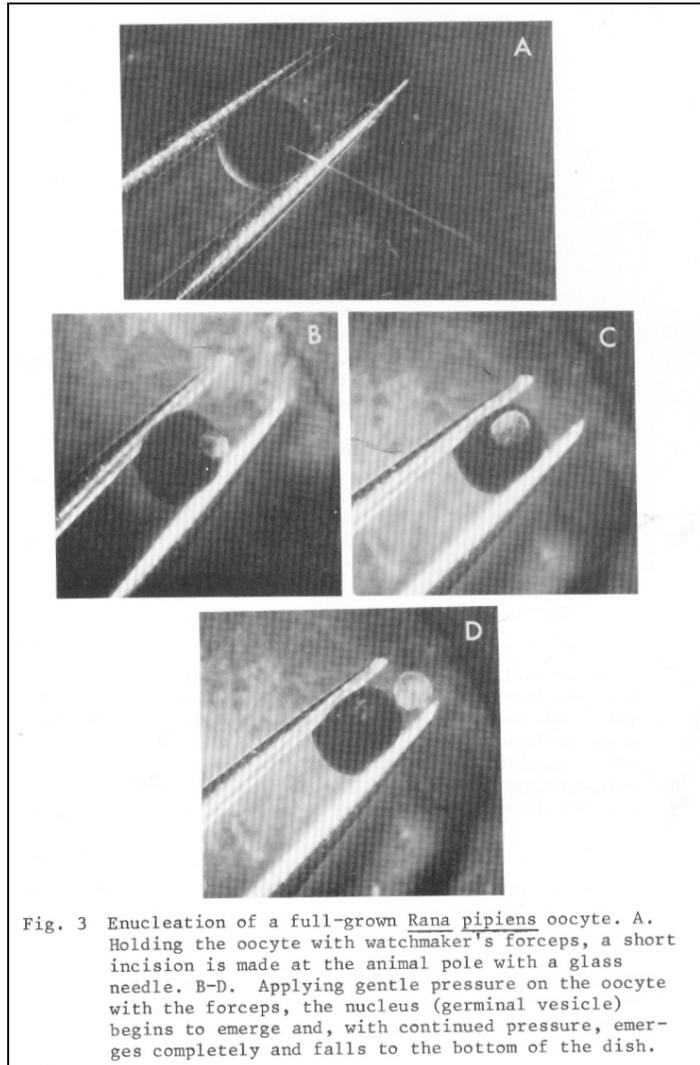


Fig. 3 Enucleation of a full-grown *Rana pipiens* oocyte. A. Holding the oocyte with watchmaker's forceps, a short incision is made at the animal pole with a glass needle. B-D. Applying gentle pressure on the oocyte with the forceps, the nucleus (germinal vesicle) begins to emerge and, with continued pressure, emerges completely and falls to the bottom of the dish.

a urinal while an unconcerned lady is cleaning a nearby sink. I also learned later that these cleaning ladies—and others in their working class—were all Flemish. But more about that later.

This was not my first trip to Europe, but earlier visits had taken me to larger cities. This time I was going to be “out in the country.” Mol was a small town compared to other places I had visited—and the culture in northern Belgium was vastly different from most of the rest of the country. It was only five or six miles from the border with The Netherlands. This part of Belgium was all Flemish. The people spoke Flemish, as opposed to the French that was spoken in the majority of the country. And we soon discovered that the Flemish people were viewed by the majority as second-class citizens and were treated as such.

Of course, none of this had any impact on the scientific meeting that was being conducted at the Center. In fact, we would probably have been unaware of it if my new friend Syd Craig had not arrived at the symposium with his own car. Syd had stopped in Germany on the way to Belgium and had purchased a new Audi automobile. So, we had wheels to take us to Mol to spend a couple of evenings visiting the village and taking in some of the local color—and some of its liquid refreshments. It didn't take us long to discover that as strangers we would be dealt with very cautiously until we were identified as Americans. If we had ordered our beers in French, our reception would have remained cool and distant. But, the welcome mat was out and bonhomie prevailed as soon as it was discovered that we did not come from French-speaking Belgium. That class distinction was a lot more obvious here than in Brussels.

The opening lecture in the symposium was given by Dr. Jean Brachet of the University of Brussels. At the time, Dr. Brachet was a leading light in application of molecular biology techniques to the study of embryology. This was a relatively new field that my colleague Denny Smith and I had entered with our collaboration a few years earlier. Denny was an embryologist and I a molecular biologist.

I had been anxious to meet Dr. Brachet while we were together at the symposium. So, during a break in the proceedings the first morning after his lecture, I approached the good doctor and introduced myself. “Dr. Brachet,” I said. “I've been hoping to meet you. I'm Dr. Ecker.” Oh. You're Dr. Ecker,” he replied shaking my hand. “I've been looking forward to meeting you. Could we possibly have lunch together this noon?” Of course, I accepted without hesitation. I don't have any recollection of the luncheon conversation, but it was certainly a highlight of my visit to Belgium.

Syd and I were both speakers in the last session of the symposium and we began talking about the possibility of changing my travel plans so we could spend more time together and add a little more adventure to our visit to Europe. My plane was scheduled to leave from Brussels for London the morning of the day after the symposium closed, and my plans were to get transport from Mol to Brussels and retrace my itinerary back to Chicago. Syd had another idea. His wife was due to arrive at Le Bourget airport in Paris sometime after noon that day where he would pick her up for some travels around Europe before shipping his new car to the U.S. and returning home. He suggested that we travel together to Paris and I get a flight out of Le Bourget that would connect with my flight from London to Chicago. We checked the schedules and found a flight that would make that connection.

In addition, we had met a scientist at the symposium who worked at the Center in Mol and whose wife and daughter needed a lift to a town in southern Belgium that was on our way to Paris. Syd offered them a ride with us. Then as these plans were developing, a professor at the University of Louvain, whom we had befriended at the symposium, invited us to stop and have dinner with him at his university on our way south. The two ladies that were to be our passengers

agreed to join us for dinner so, in the afternoon after the symposium closed, we all loaded into Syd's new car and headed south.

The University of Louvain was established in the 15th century and some of its architecture dates back to that time. In fact, the faculty club in which we had dinner was surrounded by a moat. I don't remember much about that dinner, but it was a fascinating experience spending time in a building that had been around for half a millennium. I also don't remember where we dropped off the ladies, but it was late in the evening by the time we got on the road to Paris.

The expressway between Brussels and Paris was a superb highway and I don't recall that it had any posted limit, at least in France. We were driving 80 mph for much of the time and locals were still passing us like we were standing still—even when we were within the Paris city limits. It was well after midnight when we arrived in Paris, but that hour didn't seem to limit all the activity of the Parisians. They were as active as if it were midday. However, we did discover that the ticket counters at Le Bourget airport were closed and wouldn't open till eight in the morning. So, we had a few hours to spend checking out the city—and, hopefully, getting a little sleep.

Remarkably, Syd found his way around without getting lost and he found our way to the Champs-Élysées and, we drove around the Arc de Triomphe and parked in front of the Louvre. That excursion was worth the trip to Paris. By then, it was almost four in the morning, so we decided to get a few Zs in the car. First, however, I had to find a bathroom which, at that time in that place was impossible. The next best bet was the river Seine. It was only a short walk down the street. At that hour of the morning, there weren't any spectators, so I was able to relieve myself in private on the right(?) bank of the Seine and we got in a few winks before we had to take off for Le Bourget airport to find my way home.

At the BEA ticket counter at the airport, we were advised that the flight for London I was planning on taking was already booked solid. No seat on that plane for me—and I couldn't afford to gamble that waiting in standby would get me on the plane. The BEA ticket agent suggested that I go to the Air France counter and see what they could do for me. In fact, they did have a solution, but it was not a piece of cake. They had a flight from Paris to Chicago that would get me home before the time my flight from London would have arrived—and they had space on it for me. However, it was leaving from Orle airport, which was on the opposite side of Paris from where we were at Le Bourget...and it was leaving pretty soon.

Apprised of my dilemma, Syd simply viewed it a one more leg in our Belgium/France adventure and announced, "Let's go." I quickly booked a seat on that flight and we headed for the parking lot. Earlier, I had been apprehensive about the frenetic pace of Paris traffic. Now I was happy to see Syd blend in with the "crazies" I had been condemning a few hours earlier. We made it to Orle with ample time for me to check in and communicate with my family that plans had changed. Regrettably, however, there was an ongoing strike among communication workers in France and it was impossible to make a phone call or send a cable. Then, I was apprised that the plane had a scheduled stop in Montreal, where I might be able to alert Myrna of my altered arrival time. So, at least I had some faint hope of looking back on our Paris adventure with something other than regrets. With thanks, I sent Syd back to Le Bourget to connect with his wife and I boarded my flight to Chicago.

The only thing I remember about that flight to Montreal was the landing. Apparently, Paris highways were not the only place that "crazies" emerged from the French population. As soon and the wheels of that plane hit the ground, passengers were out of their seats, retrieving

their luggage and racing to the front of the plane. Fortunately, after the stampede, the stewardess gave me permission to deplane to make a phone call and I was able to rearrange my pickup at O'Hare.

I have not seen Syd since that morning at Orle Airport in Paris in 1971, but I still think often of our adventures in Belgium and France. Sometime after I arrived home, I did get a letter from him. I don't recall anything he said in the letter, but I will never forget the salutation. Instead of "Dear Dick," it said "Old Yellow Seine,".