

## Past Lives

My predecessor as Editor-in-Chief of this journal suggested that the life stories of eminent clinical chemists might appear from time to time in the pages of the journal. As far as I can see, this suggestion was never taken up. I have therefore decided to take the plunge with the life story of a great friend of mine who died about 15 years ago. He was one of the pioneer inventors in the field as well as being a brave and highly honored soldier in the 2nd world war, and it gives me great pleasure to bring his story to a wider audience.

David L. Williams

(If anyone would like to submit an interesting life story of another eminent clinical chemist, I will be very pleased to publish it).

Professor Joachim Kohn

Professor Joachim Kohn who was the "inventor extraordinary to the Medical Laboratory" died in London on 31 March 1987.

He was born in Poland in 1912. He qualified in medicine in Poland in 1936, served in the Polish forces and became a prisoner of war in Russia until 1941, being one of the few officers to survive alive from the Katyn massacre.



*Professor Joachim Kohn*

Thereafter he moved to the United Kingdom and served bravely in the British 8th Army throughout its campaigns until 1947, being awarded the Military Cross and the Silver Order of Merit with swords.

In order to see more of the world in peacetime he became a ship's surgeon for two years before training in St Mary's Hospital Roehampton, London where he became a Consultant Clinical Pathologist in 1955, and later a Senior Lecturer in Chemical Pathology in the University of London UK, officially retiring in 1977. He was such a constructive enthusiast, however, that he never stopped working and became a part-time consultant to the Royal Marsden Hospital London and to St Anthony's Hospital in Surrey, UK. Later he was appointed a visiting Professor to the University of Surrey in Guildford UK a post that he held until his death.

During a time of high technology which frequently goes wrong, J'im Kohn was an innovative genius who gave the world (without personal profit) simple reliable methods that workers could set up in their own small departments for very little money; e.g. detecting amoebae in tropical diseases; burn dressings (adopted by the World Health Organisation); self-sterilising moisturisers for ventilators; the first simple dip-stick types of laboratory tests where layers of chemical reagents were held behind transparent cellulose membranes and which gave a colour reaction after being dipped into various body fluids (especially the first dip-stick glucose test strips). This kind of test has been invaluable in the third world and has recently been adapted to detect AIDS.

Professor Kohn will be most remembered for simplifying the analytical technique of electrophoresis; electrophoresis had been initially invented by Tiselius in the 1930s but the apparatus was very complex, difficult to use and extremely expensive. J'im introduced the supporting membrane of cellulose acetate that could be easily picked up with tweezers so that the protein could be fixed, stained and studied. Within a year (1958) this technique advanced further; a dry strip of cellulose acetate was used to absorb an imprint of the original wet strip and this could then be used for the detection of specific antigens by their antibodies. Thus cellulose gel electrophoresis led to the immunofixation technique now used worldwide. This major discovery of Professor Kohn has enabled the early detection of inflammation or infection, confirmation of nutritional disorders, detection of many types of cancer, and of disorders of blood lipids and iso-enzymes.

J'im Kohn was fluent in six languages, and was invited to lecture in many parts of the world. He served on international committees for Burns, for Onchodevelopmental Biology in medicine, and for Pathology. He was given the Kotama medal for electrophoresis (Japan); the Abrogina Medal for his contribution to the detection and treatment of burn injuries (Italy), the Hirai Medal for Cancer Detection (Japan) and he was the last surviving member of the Japanese Electrophoresis Society. He has been sadly missed in many part of the world especially for his sense of humour and his enthusiastic willingness to help any worker interested in mastering his many techniques. There have been many real and practical contributions worldwide that he has achieved in his memorable life.