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Cedar Mountain, NC 28718
08 December, 1976

Dr. Joshua Lederberg
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Dear Dr. Lederberg:

I am glad to furnish you with whatever recollections I have of the period that Ed Tatum was in Utrecht and of the years 1939-1941 that I was with Ed and George Beadle at Stanford.

In September 1936 I was a second year post graduate student in K~~ö~~gl's Institute (please do not omit the "umlaut" on the o of K~~ö~~gl's name) working towards a Doctor's degree. One afternoon K~~ö~~gl came into my research quarters and told me that an American, by name of Edward Tatum, was going to work in his Institute and that he had decided that I would make a good companion of said American. I was to share my small research quarters with Ed Tatum. I was not especially delighted to share my small quarters with an American, who according to K~~ö~~gl wanted to learn everything about the isolation of minute quantities of nutrients from large amounts of raw material.

A few days later Ed Tatum arrived, and through his charm all my resentments dissolved and Ed and I became very close friends. My wife and I (we had just been married) and Ed, June and Peggy (their oldest daughter, I think, about 2 years old at that time) went on numerous picnics, had dinners at each other houses and had a great time. Ed and June were our first American friends.

Ed was attracted to K~~ö~~gl's institute because of the fame that K~~ö~~gl had amassed by being able to extract minute quantities of biologically active material from large quantities of raw material. Ed wanted to continue his studies on the "thiamine-like" substance and to isolate this substance from yeast. He had hoped that he would find the necessary knowhow in K~~ö~~gl's institute. So Ed extracted pounds and pounds of "Marmite" (an English yeast concentrate, favored by food faddists), but never got anywhere, because K~~ö~~gl was not really interested in that work. If Ed had wanted to work on Biotin, that would have been another matter. Ed was very disappointed about his stay at K~~ö~~gl's institute because he did not get anywhere. K~~ö~~gl did not offer much assistance and tried to steer Ed into investigations on Biotin, together with Nils Fries.

One of Ed's last comments was: "I have worked here for a year and do not even have one publication to show for it."

However, Ed had a very good relation with Nils Fries and from that relation resulted the later work on Neurospora.

The following covers a very personal episode, which not very many people know. I would prefer, that my personal role in this not be quoted directly.

This might pose some difficulties for you to describe the selection of Ed by Beadle for the position at Stanford, which eventually led to Ed receiving the Nobel prize together with you and Beadle.

During the summer of 1936 Dr. Arie Jan Haagen-Smit, who was Kogl's Senior Laboratory Assistant, resigned and went to Harvard U. where he met George Beadle. In 1937 Beadle was transferring to Stanford U. and he asked Haagen-Smit whether he knew a good organic chemist, versed in isolating small amount of biologically active substances from raw materials. Specifically, the isolation and identification of the elusive eye color hormone of Drosophila. Haagen-Smit recommended me and I had some correspondence with Beadle, which terminated in Beadle offering me a one year position as a research associate at Stanford, and suggesting that I visit Ephrussi in Paris to get the latest information on this problem. Of course, I was very excited about this, and discussed this at length with Ed, who thought that it would be an excellent opportunity for me to get ahead in the Academic world.

Then, one day, I received in the early morning mail a letter from Beadle, informing me that the Stanford authorities balked at the prospect of bringing a foreigner with his family (we had one child) to the US when the definite prospects of employment were only one year (remember, this was 1937, depression) Beadle wrote that he was offering this position to an American Biochemist, who at that time happened to be in Europe. If this American Scientist would not accept the offer, the research associate ship would be mine. After reading the letter, it was quite obvious to me that the American Biochemist was Ed Tatum.

When I came to the lab I found a very embarrassed Ed Tatum. Ed and I discussed the matter at length but did not get anywhere, until I broke the dead lock: "Look here Ed, you are an American with a family, and you have to go back, and you have to find a job. I am Dutch, and I will find myself a job in Holland. You take the job that Beadle offers you."

Such was Ed's sense of fairness that it took me another two hours to convince him that he should accept Beadle's offer, but under Ed's condition that he would find me a position in the US as soon as he could. Which he did, and in 1939 I came to Stanford as a research associate of C.V. Taylor, on the strong recommendation of Ed. I was to work with C.V. Taylor on the excystment and encystment of Colpoda.

At that time Ed was frantically engaged in trying to isolate the eye color hormone and slaved 7 days a week on this. (This research was written up in Time, with a picture of Ed looking at a heap of Drosophila). On February 16 1940, Beadle threw a big party to announce the isolation of the hormone, whose identity was not known.

In 1941 came the publication of Butenandt which deflated Ed's heroic efforts.

I remember that Ed volunteered to give a course in Comparative Biochemistry, but this course was initiated in 1942. At that time Beadle had started to use an antiquated X-ray machine, situated next to my office in the catacombs of Jordan Hall. I was curious what was going on, but neither Beadle, nor Ed would give me any clue. However, one day Ed told me how he was testing the need for growth factors for Neurospora by measuring the rate of growth by the distance travelled by the mycelium. But I never knew what was going on, until the first publication.

I left Stanford in 1941.

However, I remained in touch with my old boss, C.V. Taylor. From him I learned of the difficulties with the new president. C.V., as he was always called,

also informed me that Ed had received an offer from Yale. Ed would ^{probably} have stayed at Stanford, had it not been for June, who was tired of the West Coast and wanted to go East. These are probably the "other circumstances". C.V. wanted to replace Ed with me, but died before he could work this out.

Ed and I have beenⁱⁿ very close friends, ever since our first encounter in Köggl's Institute. He was instrumental in supporting my promotions in the VA and in me receiving an exchange fellowship with the Polish Academy of Science in 1973.

You might enjoy one anecdote about Ed's stay in Köggl's Institute. Köggl had been invited to give a special lecture at a Congress in London. Köggl, vain as he was, decided to give his lecture in English, since he had an English speaking foreigner in his Institute. So for three weeks prior to his lecture at the London meeting, Ed was called to Köggl's office every afternoon to listen to Köggl's lecture and to correct his pronunciation. Köggl went to London, gave his lecture and asked ~~after the lecture~~ B.C.J.G. Knight after the lecture what he thought of it. Knight answered: "your lecture was brilliant and exciting, but please tell me: "Where did you learn that horrible American accent." Ed had left Utrecht, when Köggl returned from England.

I do hope that I have given you the information you needed.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if need further information, if I can give it.

Sincerely,



Dr. W. J. van Wagtendonk
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how Ed's death
motivizes historical
prospecting.