


Department of Genetics
Stanford University
Palo Alto, California

April 23, 1960


Dr. Boris Rotman
Veterans Administration Hospital
Albany, New York

Dear Boris:

I am sure that you will keep the following in careful confidence as I ask you to do. I would have called you, as I have what I hope will be an exciting prospect for you to consider, but it may be better for you to be able to think about it more carefully.

To give you the story historically, Carl Djerassi is joining Stanford as Professor of Chemistry this fall, and I had occasion to meet him during his preliminary visits. He was once at Wisconsin; subsequently has earned an outstanding reputation as a synthetic organic chemist in the field of steroids, has also done much interesting work in ancillary fields, e.g. optical rotatory dispersion (UV) for group analysis. At the present time, he is also Vice-President for Research of Syntex Corporation in Mexico City, and he will be keeping a very close connection with Syntex in future. We have gotten to discuss a number of problems and in consequence I have agreed to accept a role as a scientific adviser in biological research, a somewhat closer role than the usual consultantship. Syntex is a very rapidly growing company, and having made an outstanding success with steroids is anxious to broaden its interests. They are the most research-oriented group I have ever seen in such a field; that Djerassi will remain as a Stanford professor will also help illustrate its academic direction. Most of the stigmata that apply to so many drug research houses do not, I think, apply here; although of course there will remain as an ultimate objective to discover new products that can be used in medical and scientific work, and whose sale can repay the investment.

My own urgent recommendation has been to gamble heavily in the field of polynucleotide metabolism, without our being able to point to any very definite therapeutic application at the present time. This is absolutely bound to come up, and it would be very important to Syntex to have built up prior experience when the breaks do ~~not~~ come. Meanwhile, I felt that a mixed pure- and developmental- research program at a company like Syntex could be of great help to biologists for the production of scarce intermediates and for the identification of new properties and reactions. The details have certainly to be worked out, but I felt that an attractive program could be built up on this theme that would concentrate, in the beginning, on fundamental work, e.g. on the biological significance and properties of synthetic ~~at~~ polynucleotides and their analogues, and gradually build up experience and a working team for enzymology and eventually production. Except for the general theme, the project should not be thought of as well crystallized; it would make little sense to bring in creative talent and then to try to force this into a predetermined mold. I would serve as a general consultant to this and perhaps other biological programs; the detailed direction would be worked out on the spot with the other people at Syntex.

We have in mind the possibility of an initial group with a mature scientist as its leader, and provision for two or three younger associates (Ph.D.) and whatever further technical assistance might be necessary. The plans for this are far from definite; there is a possibility of establishing this in Mexico at the main research center, for the time being. In view of Djerassi's moving to Stanford, however, there is also some thought of establishing another laboratory in this vicinity, which would have many obvious advantages too, but which would also be quite closely. (My private opinion is that this will certainly happen, the main question is whether it will be right away or in two or three years or so.) I should say that Syntex has the most enlightened policy (and the means) for supporting research work, e.g. with provision for travel, ~~tax~~ publication, etc.

What you should have guessed by now is that I am sounding you out as to your possible interest in accepting a position as the organizer of this research team. Your breadth of experience in the past makes an outstanding qualification, your particular interests now are not far removed from the axis of the program, and the opportunity does present, I think, an exciting challenge. The future prospects for the company are even more exciting than its past accomplishments, and with the kind of leadership it has, and its recent financial success (see what the Syntex stock has been doing in the past few months on the American Stock Exchange) should give it the commanding position for pharmaceutical-biochemical research and development in the next few years. Syntex has been playing a very important role in supporting chemical research at the University of Mexico, and habitually a number of graduate students do their thesis work in the Syntex labs., and other affiliations have ensued. Especially if the lab itself is organized in Mexico your familiarity with Spanish and Latin American life will be an additional benefit; I am sure some arrangement can be made to protect your American citizenship if this becomes an issue on account of foreign residence. Needless to say the financial arrangements should be matched to your responsibilities and, I am sure will be attractive to you. When to start is open to mutual discussion.

I am not able to make a definite offer, as some factors are still uncertain; however, I would appreciate hearing from you, hopefully within two weeks if possible as to your tentative reaction, so that if it is favorable I can push the matter further. I will be seeing Djerassi again the end of May and it would help to have some time before that for some further discussion. If there is some likelihood of mutual agreement I assume he will invite you to visit then in Mexico as the next step.

Please call me collect at Davenport 1-2764 if you would like to discuss any of this further by phone.

With best regards,
as ever


Joshua Lederberg