



NEWS & VIEWS

Legends of Allergy and Immunology



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Legends of allergy and immunology: Georg Rajka

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Georg Rajka was born on March 10, 1925, in Budapest, Hungary, as a son of the famous Hungarian dermatologist Ödon Rajka. He studied medicine in Budapest and became specialist in Dermato-Venereology in 1952. From 1949 to 1956, he was a deputy doctor and a researcher at St. Stephan Hospital in Budapest. After the Soviet occupation in 1956, he left Hungary and emigrated to Sweden where he started working as a deputy doctor at Karolinska hospital in Stockholm.

In 1963, Georg Rajka completed his PhD thesis on “Atopic Dermatitis” and became Associate Professor until 1970. In 1971, he was appointed Professor and Head of the Department of Dermatology in Umeå, Sweden. At the same time, he got a call from Oslo University and became Professor and Chairman at the Department of Dermatology at the Rikshospitalet in Oslo from 1971 until his retirement in 1995.

In 1959, he married Dr phil Susanne Rajka, with whom he had two children, Thomas Erik (born 1963) and Anders Georg (born 1965). Together with his wife Susanne, they were a perfect team in welcoming and hosting many guests and colleagues and friends in Norway on many occasions. In autumn 2012, he became seriously ill, but he was able to celebrate his 88th birthday on March 10, 2013, shortly before he died.

Georg Rajka—from his PhD thesis on—dedicated his scientific life to the disease “Atopic Dermatitis.” He wrote over 150 articles and 2 books, bestsellers on this disease, in 1975 and the second in 1989. [^{1,2} He lectured at 16 universities and was visiting professor in Mayo Clinic and University of California, San Francisco, in 1975. He received several international awards, among others from Germany, France, Finland, and Sweden. Together with his American friend and colleague Jon Hanifin, he created the “Diagnostic Criteria of Atopic Dermatitis” published in 1980 as a “citation classic” in the field.³

When Georg Rajka took over as Chair of the Department in Oslo University Hospital, Norwegian dermatology was predominantly a clinical discipline without major influence in modern research or relation to international dermatology. Georg Rajka put a focus on establishing pathophysiology research especially in biochemistry, physiology, pathology, and transplantation immunology and bringing it into dermatology. He was able to do this due to his excellent administrative and organizational skills; he made Oslo a center for research in atopic dermatitis.

One of the major achievements of his life was the organization of a series of international symposia focused on “Atopic Dermatitis.” The first one was held in Oslo in 1979, followed by the next in 1982, then one in Loen in 1985 at the Geiranger Fjord, in Bergen in 1989, and in Lillehammer in 1992. These symposia were unique, in that from all over the world, people interested in research in this field were gathering and presenting their new data without big lectures or grand speeches. Everybody presented either orally or by a poster what were the most exciting findings of his or her work.

Georg Rajka was especially eager to support young people and find them all over the world and invite them to the symposia. These symposia were such a success that after he retired they were continued by his younger friends: first 1996 in Aarhus, then 1999 in Davos (Switzerland), 2001 in Portland (USA), 2003 in Rome (Italy), 2005 in Arcachon (France), 2008 in Kyoto (Japan), 2010 in Munich (Germany), 2013 in Moshi (Tanzania), 2014 in Nottingham (UK), 2016 in Sao Paulo (Brazil), and 2018 in Utrecht (the Netherlands). The 2020 symposium will be held in Seoul (Korea). Since 1999, these symposia were named “Georg Rajka Symposia.” He was eager to attend these symposia and able to join in himself and give a message to the international crowd long after his retirement.

In Norway, Georg Rajka was elected member of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters (Det Norske Videnskaps Academi) in 1988 as the first dermatologist following the famous Cesar Boeck who died in 1917.

Meanwhile, an award—namely the Georg Rajka medal—has also been established by his widow Susanne Rajka, which is awarded by the International Society of Atopic Dermatitis (ISAD) to the best young researcher in the field every two years at the Georg Rajka Symposium.

Since his early days, Georg Rajka was convinced that allergy may play a role in atopic dermatitis, the difficult disease that had been known under so many different names in the history of dermatology. The discovery of IgE in 1969 was taken up by his research and motivated him in his scientific studies. Via his books, his pupils, and his symposia, his name will be connected with Atopic Dermatitis in the future. This disease still is a fascinating area for research extending beyond allergy and skin barrier function.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Prof. Johannes Ring has no conflict of interests.

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