

JJL: More Than an Educator

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ABSTRACT: The loss of J. J. Lagowski is also an opportunity to share Joe's least-known achievements. This is a personal memory that illustrates Joe's passion and interests beyond conventional chemistry.

KEYWORDS: General Public, History/Philosophy, Textbooks/Reference Books, Student-Centered Learning

It was really sad to know the passing of Joe Lagowski, great friend and gifted educator.¹ I want to add some information about our personal contacts from 2005 on, which disclose his multifaceted personality. By that time, Joe and two professors at the University of Lisbon—Elisa Maia and Estela Jardim, who were engaged in both chemical education and history—agreed to dip into the Arab contribution to the development of chemistry in Europe. Having received postdoctoral education in England, Joe recognized that the Iberian peninsula (Al-Andalus for the Islamic civilization) was the appropriate scenario to initiate that project, with abundant sources disseminated in museums, collections, and universities. Indeed, Arabs excelled at botany and introduced medical remedies based on observation and extraction techniques. This knowledge was certainly the cradle of Chymistry, rather than charlatanism and the vain search for transmutation that dominated European courts for centuries.^{2,3} In Jensen's words: "alchemy proper is not an important progenitor of modern chemistry, which instead clearly evolved out of metallurgy and pharmacy".³

The team was able to attract the attention of three well-respected Arab scholars: two from Egypt and the other from Jordan. Elisa Jardim knew my peripheral activities as history of chemistry aficionado and invited me to join that steering committee. We all gathered in Lisbon in March 2006. Joe enjoyed the visit as a whole, appreciating the interest and feedback from other Portuguese experts in Arab studies. We were invited to have dinner at the Embassy of Egypt (I recall an intense and vivid conversation between Joe and the ambassador). The project aimed at locating and reinterpreting chemical works of Arabic and Islamic origin in the light of modern theories and knowledge, and had a focus on pedagogy as well (dissemination of results in written and multimedia forms, attracting students in the history of chemistry).⁴ The goals were well identified, but they were also too ambitious to be practical. Although some expectations were kept for some time, no funding was available and the project progressively vanished. Joe regretted the scarce echo received in the Arabic world.

The project could still be rescued at a modest level. The merger of chemistry and history often helps understand facts and methods. In addition, it would be another opportunity to reconcile Western and Middle Eastern cultures. All in all, this is part of Joe's legacy, a man who is worth his weight in gold.

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Notes

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