CORRESPONDENCE

Pole imprisoned

An open letter to the President of the Polish Academy of Science

Paris, 24 November 1982

SIR — We would like to raise the question of the fate of one of our Polish colleagues, Antoni Stawikowski, a matter which is of great concern to us.

Antoni Stawikowski is a research scientist at the Nicolas Copernicus Centre for Astronomy at Torun. He occupies an important position in the Polish astronomical community, having recently been appointed vice-president of the Polish Astronomy Society. Following his election in 1981 to the position of regional manager of the independent trade union Solidarity he asked for his responsibilities at the research institute to be temporarily suspended so that he could devote his attentions to his union duties.

He was interned on the night of 12/13 December 1981 following the declaration of a state of war in Poland. After a period of detention at Potulice prison he was transferred to the Strzebielinek internment camp. He was freed in August 1982 and returned to his research at the Nicolas Copernicus Centre for Astronomy at Torun.

Now, we have just learned that he appears to have been imprisoned again. We would be very grateful if you would outline the exact motives behind this new imprisonment and specify precisely the nature of the proceedings being brought against our colleague Antoni Stawikowski. We would also like to know his conditions of internment.

Whilst waiting for what we hope will be your rapid reply, we would like you to accept, Mr President, our respectful good wishes.

E. SCHATZMAN
(President)

On behalf of the Council of the Société Francaise des Specialistes d'Astronomie, Paris, France

Chinese conundrum

SIR — M.C. McKenna incorrectly implies (*Nature* 18 November, p.212) that, in transcribed Chinese, disyllabic names are all given names and monosyllabic ones surnames. The reverse is true in the name provided for me by Chinese friends: Situ Li. Note also that in *pinyin* romanization there is no hyphen in disyllabic names. Incidentally Chinese names are not the only ones to give problems: a German correspondent once addressed me as "Herr Professor Doktor St. Philip".

PHILIP J. STEWART

Commonwealth Forestry Institute, Oxford, UK

Napoleon's health

SIR — In *Nature* of 14 October there were two contributions that bear relevance upon my own theory of criminal poisoning of Napoleon at St Helena. Lewin *et al.* [1] found no arsenic in a lock of hair obtained by Captain Poppleton, one of the British officers at St Helena. The sample did contain a moderately increased level of antimony, however.

Napoleon's health improved considerably during the first 9 months of his captivity. The length of hair that grew on Napoleon's head during this period can be estimated at 9–10 cm. The lock of hair obtained by Poppleton may well have been from this period.

It is more difficult to explain why the analyses showed an increased level of antimony. It is true that antimony is a component of tartar emetic, which was used as a medication, but it is also known that Napoleon stubbornly refused to accept medicines. As far as we know, Napoleon had no symptoms of antimony poisoning before March 1820. If the results of the analyses are correct, one is forced to question the authenticity of the sample.

One statement by Lewin *et al.* needs correcting. My theory of arsenic poisoning [2-4] was not based mainly on the high contents of arsenic found in hairs from Napoleon, but mainly on written evidence (diaries, letters, postmortem reports). The results of analyses of hairs must be seen as a confirmation.

Jones and Ledingham [5] found arsenic in wallpaper from the drawing room of Longwood. The authors mention that mould on damp wallpaper can metabolize arsenic compounds to volatile arsenic trimethyl. Leaving aside the question of how damp Napoleon's wallpaper was, the fact remains that the clinical picture is not one of continuous low-level poisoning. Napoleon repeatedly suffered from very severe attacks of illness; these were separated by periods of recovery. Analyses of hairs confirm that Napoleon repeatedly consumed relatively large amounts of arsenic.

For about 15 months, from July 1819 to September 1820, Napoleon enjoyed a relatively good health. During this period he could again go for walks, take part in gardening, and go horse riding. Napoleon's disease proceeded independently of any constantly active cause.

Furthermore, Napoleon did not live alone in his house. He was surrounded by an impressive staff of Frenchmen. The diaries do not report any symptoms of chronic arsenic poisoning among these. All this indicates that the wallpaper was not a major source of arsenic in Napoleon's case.

It is a common misunderstanding that Napoleon was killed by arsenic poisoning. The cause of his death was a combination of a liquid refreshment containing bitter almonds and a large dose of calomel given 48 hours before his death. Napoleon soon fell into deep unconsciousness (the effect of mercuric cyanide). The internal surfaces of his stomach became corroded (the effect of corrosive sublimate). The main purpose of the slow arsenic poisoning was to give observers the impression that Napoleon had some chronic disease, thus making his death appear more natural. Further details about the death-blow can be found in ref. 3.

STEN FORSHUFVUD

Göteborg, Sweden

1. Lewin, P.K., Hancock, R.G.V. & Voynovich, P. *Nature* **299**, 627-628 (1982).
2. Forshufvud, S. *Who Killed Napoleon?* (Hutchinson, London, 1962).
3. Forshufvud, S. & Weider, B. *Assassination at St Helena* (Mitchell, Vancouver, 1978).
4. Weider, B. & Hapgood, D. *The Murder of Napoleon* (Robson, London, 1982).
5. Jones, D.E.H. & Ledingham, K.W.D. *Nature* **299**, 626-627 (1982).

Napoleon's arsenic

SIR — I wish to make the following comments on the article by Lewin *et al.* in *Nature* of 14 October (**299**, 627-628; 1982) which reported very much lower levels of arsenic in Napoleon's hair than we found (*Nature* **194**, 725; 1962).

The separation we used was a radiochemical one and the interference referred to by the authors as a possible explanation of our detection of high levels of arsenic is below the 1 per cent level. This is easily demonstrated by using the method.

Gamma-spectrometry as used by Lewin *et al.* is a poor method for arsenic analysis. Though for other investigations we use similar equipment (now standard) to that mentioned by the authors we still use the radiochemical separation for trace analysis. We have applied the technique to the analysis of several thousand of standards and samples since the investigation of Napoleon's hair.

HAMILTON SMITH

Department of Forensic Medicine and Science, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Reprinting history

SIR — Reprints (also known as extracts, offprints) of articles from scientific journals have been used as a form of scientific information exchange for over two hundred years. Scientists have, since the early nineteenth century, acquired and collected them for their personal professional libraries. One well-known reprint collection is that of Wolfgang Ernst Pauli at the European Organization for Nuclear Research, Geneva (a list of it was published in 1969).

In connection with a study of the history of the reprint, I would appreciate hearing from scientists about the earliest reprints they have seen, what nineteenth century collections they may know of which may have survived, and the importance they attach to such collections.

ELLEN B. WELLS

Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Washington DC, USA

Oncogene activation

SIR — The article by Reddy *et al.* (*Nature* **300**, 149; 1982) describes a relatively minor change in DNA structure which results in the activation of the T24 human bladder cancer oncogene. The change is a point mutation which according to the authors is a "mutation of guanosine into thymidine". Obviously, the intent of the authors was to describe a deoxyguanosine to thymidine transition, or better yet a mutation of guanine into thymine. Their error may seem trivial and perhaps amusing, were it not for the fact that such minor differences can have apparently significant consequences on the properties of genes, as shown by the work described in the paper. It is disconcerting that such a fundamental mistake was published in such an important article.

LASZLO BERES

Hull, Massachusetts, USA