

INTERTWINED LIVES



VIRGIL BĂRBOIU

“Petru Poni” Institute of Macromolecular Chemistry, Iasi, Romania
Senior scientist and former deputy director (1979–1999)
vbarboiu@icmpp.ro

Professor Cristofor I. Simionescu cannot be forgotten by anyone of those having had the chance of working around and with him for decades, after having shared success, disappointments and difficult situations. On the other hand, it is not an easy task to evoke his feelings, creed and qualities, or to comment on the achievements of a personality who, throughout a lifetime, has dominated the Romanian academic and scientific life. That is why I am going to refer more to his interference with the “Petru Poni” Institute of Macromolecular Chemistry, which I like to think he considered as close as the Department of Macromolecular Chemistry at the Technical University, trying to evidence the deep links of the activity of these two scientific institutions of Iași. Even so, I feel overwhelmed, but I will try to push my limits, mainly because those who knew him directly are fewer and fewer, many being not anymore among us, others having already forgotten him, and most – the too young ones – having not known him.

The relation of Professor Simionescu with the “Petru Poni” Institute is sketched in Figure 1, whose scientific coordinator during his entire academic life and scientific manager he was for 30 years (1970–2000), while also fully involved in its development, in the 1960's, as President of the Iasi Branch of the Romanian Academy. Regarding the beginnings of the “Petru Poni” Institute, if Professor Radu Cernătescu founded it in Iași, in 1949, it was Professor Cristofor Simionescu who turned it into an institute of macromolecular chemistry. The transmission of relay between the

two was dramatic and full of emotions. In 1957, when the first third of the institute building was put into service, Professor Cernătescu, who had initiated the building, died in Paris. When he left the country, he asked Professor Simionescu to take whole care of the well-being of the institute, especially by matching the research to the national needs and trends of contemporary chemistry, but also by creating the necessary human and material conditions. And the Professor, as I will sometimes call him next because that is how my whole generation called him, entirely fulfilled his predecessor's wish.

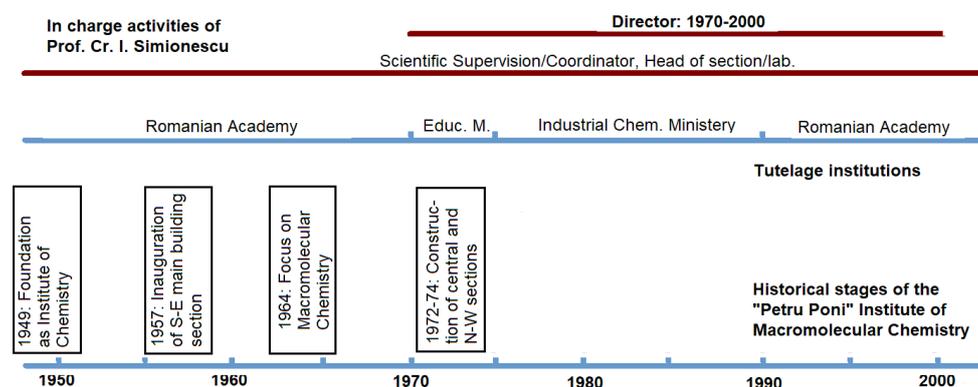


Fig. 1. Interference between the history of the “Petru Poni” Institute and the life of Professor Cristofor I. Simionescu.

In the 1960's, he determined the orientation of research to the field of polymer science and continuously stimulated profound study and expansion of scientific concerns. It was also then that he began a courageous hiring of young researchers, taking care both of their scientific training, sending them to specialization stages abroad, and of their social problems. At the end of those years and beginning of the following decade, the staff of the institute worked with passion and determination, in an atmosphere of harmony, collegial friendship and fair-play. It was probably the most beautiful and productive period for the researchers of the time because, later on, obligations were imposed for results with predetermined applications, to which it was not at all easy to respond.

Professor Simionescu succeeded in finalizing the building and in constructing installations for technological experiments and small-scale production even in the 1970's, namely in the years of research conversion. The achievements of the two directors mentioned above, illustrated in Figure 2, are clearly in favour of Professor Simionescu. However, it must be said that the land on which the institute is located was given by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the communist leader of Romania at the time, to Professor Cernătescu, as an appreciation of his left-wing orientation. This land has been cut from the neighbouring Exhibition Park.



Fig. 2. Aerial view of the institute area illustrating the buildings due to directors Cernătescu and Simionescu.

Lobbying actions (current word, unknown at that time) were largely based on the prestige that Professor Simionescu enjoyed in the scientific and academic community. For example, in the early 1970's, the institute was visited by the Prime-Minister of Romania (Manea Mănescu), who approved the purchase of the first scientific computer, and also by the Prime-Minister of the United Kingdom (Margaret Thatcher), the second visit constituting a significant recognition that the Professor and the "Petru Poni" Institute enjoyed abroad. Much is to be said about this recognition, to which, in addition to publishing institute's results in important scientific journals, Professor's relations with the heads of world's top polymer schools have significantly contributed. The peak recognition of the Romanian polymer school at the time was represented by the 29th IUPAC Symposium on Macromolecules, (held in 1983, in Bucharest) whose invitations were made and guaranteed by the Professor. More than 40 lectures were then presented by most active polymer scientists, as P.J. Flory, H. Benoit, W.H. Stockmayer, G. Smets and B. Rånby, but the great names very close to him are much numerous. I shall never forget the visits of many personalities at the institute, as well as the bilateral seminars on polymer science, such as Romania–USA (1976 in Iași and 1983 in Bucharest), Romania–France (1993 in Iași) and Iași-Freiburg (1980 in Freiburg, 1982 in Mamaia and 1992 in Iași), the last one being due to the friendship with Professor H.–J. Cantow.

In the country, pioneering research on natural and synthetic polymers started in the 1940's, along with the organization of the education of chemistry and physics of polymers – all these initiatives acknowledging Professor Simionescu as the founder of the Romanian school of polymer science. This title has preceded his recognition in the world of polymer science, remaining even today a reason of regional pride, unanimously recognized as one of the most significant

achievements of the Iași city in the second half of the last century. At the same time, worth mentioning is his contribution to the implementation and expansion of chemical industry in Moldova. Former large chemical plants of Iași (Terom and Moldoplast), Savinești (Fibres), Onești-Borzești (Petrochemistry, Rubber), Vaslui (Fibres), Suceava and Bacău-Letea (Cellulose), have benefited from his significant support at the then leadership of the state, as well as by substantial technical contributions from the part of the specialists trained at Polytechnic University, and, to some extent, by the technologies developed in Iași, at the "Petru Poni" Institute (polyurethanes, silicone rubber, synthetic papers) or at the Technical University (artificial fibres, cellulose-based papers). Unfortunately, he left us with the deep regret caused by the disappearance of much of this industry, without the establishment of another.

Professor Simionescu's personality was a overwhelming one. The multitude of preoccupations, his scientific and didactic, administrative, political and social responsibilities made the young colleagues consider him an earthly, intangible and even scary demigod. Yet, gradually, as the work in common and communication acquired substance, the Professor became their good teacher and parent.

Professor Cristofor I. Simionescu is the one to whom the current generations in the institute must be grateful for strengthening its research fields, the more so that the institute has always withstood difficulties, which were neither simple nor few, both before 1990 and in the early 1990's. However, the Professor, together with the research teams he had created, brought and maintained it in top positions in the scientific community. Let us not forget that he took over the administrative leadership of the institute when it was moved from the Romanian Academy (1970) to the Ministry of Education (1970–1974) and Ministry of Chemical Industry (1975–1989), where from it was brought back to the Romanian Academy as soon as this became possible (1990). The two decades of applied research were not at all simple and with numerous difficulties to face. However, the professional maturity of the researchers at that time allowed not a formal conversion of the investigation, from fundamental to applicative, but more profound studies. Significant results were obtained, the institute producing materials and technologies competitive with the imported ones, obtained in Europe and not only. Such materials included various polyurethane and silicone materials, ion-exchanging and reactive polymers, thermostable polymers and fire retardant polymers, technical papers, photo- and electro-polymers, to mention only some of them. The successes were due to the teams of researchers, whose formation and development are largely due to the efforts and active involvement of Professor Simionescu. He has raised many of us to important positions, perhaps sometimes too high, because he believed in people. Sometimes, he did this even when others would have given up.

As an institutional leader and scientific supervisor, the Professor had dedication through acumen and rapid acquisition of new knowledge in various (scientific, administrative, political) fields, through a rigorous compliance with the

legislation and regulations in force, but also with the people, which, among other aspects, explains his rapid and respected ascendancy towards subordinates and collaborators. Even if, at first glance, he might possibly appear as inflexible, he never made decisions without a thorough analysis of the situation and consultation with those who knew the problem and, when appropriate, without listening to the person concerned. He has understood the social difficulties but never forgot the repeatable mistakes that could affect the community. All decisions were taken together with the leadership group, within which he often managed to impose his point of view through his eloquence and persuasion.

The Professor led truly democratically, on the basis of mutual human relations, he was a person to whom one could go with confidence, who manifested his understanding and help without hesitation. This is explained by the fact that he was grown and educated in a family of teachers dedicated to profession and community. Much was to be appropriated from him: trust, discipline and loyalty, as individuals, passion, integrity and tenacity, as scientists.

One cannot forget the qualities with which he managed to get us out of adversarial situations. These were neither few nor simple, some being created by people against people, as it happened in the last years of communist leadership of Romania, but also in the early 1990's, when some of the staff did not agree with institute's return to the Romanian Academy. He wasted qualities and toil both at the institute and in his university department to make the Romanian polymer school as useful to the country and to gain international recognition. This was, in my opinion, Professor Cristofor I. Simionescu's creed.

I am proud and grateful for all the years along which I have been one of his close and appreciated collaborators.