

Prof. Božena Ravnihar, MD, PhD (1914-2002)



Professor Božena Ravnihar-Nataša, a partisan doctor, Nestor of Slovenian oncology, and Professor Emeritus at the Medical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana reached the end of her road. Her career was rich and fruitful and can hardly be unfolded in few words. Allow me to make us all remember of some momentous facts of her life.

She was born on March 18, 1914 in Ljubljana. She attended elementary and secondary school in Ljubljana and, after graduation from secondary school, she chose to study medicine. She started her study in Ljubljana, continued it in Prague and graduated at the Medical Faculty of Belgrade on 26 June 1940.

She joined the resistance on 28 May 1942 and was throughout the war principal head of partisan hospitals. After the war, she continued her work at the Sanitation Unit under military authority.

She was awarded with Order of Courage, Order of Partisan Star and Order of Merit for her great deeds during the Second World War. She also won the 1941 Partisan Memorial Reward.

In 1946, she was appointed Head of Laboratories at the Institute of Oncology in Ljubljana by the then Ministry of Health. She was improving her knowledge and skills at the oncology institutions abroad, in Stockholm, Copenhagen and Paris. Having obtained a fellowship from World Health Organization (WHO) she completed residency in radiotherapy and oncology in the States and also passed Board Exam there. Coming back from the States, she devoted herself to the work in Pathohistology Laboratory and was in addition to that also nominated Head of Radiotherapy Department.

In November 1950, she was elected a Teaching Assistant at the Medical Faculty of Ljubljana, in 1955 Assistant Professor, in 1961 Associate Professor of Radiotherapy and Oncology, and in 1971 Full Professor of Radiotherapy and Oncology. She was chairing the Chair of Oncology and Radiotherapy at the Medical Faculty of Ljubljana from 1964 to 1982.

On 19 June 1984, she was elected Professor Emeritus at the Medical Faculty of Ljubljana.

In 1961, she was nominated at the post of Medical Director of the Institute of Oncology

and, in January 1964, at the post of Director of the Institute of Oncology. She held that position until 18 March 1982. She retired two years later, on 18 March 1984. However, she continued to be active, creative and productive also after her retirement.

Scientific and medical achievements of Professor Ravnihar are impressively many: she wrote more than 300 papers, in which she dealt with almost every area of oncology. Her scientific articles touch upon clinical issues of cancer, particularly focusing on radiotherapy, epidemiology, and anticancer activity. She also introduced a number of innovations in cancer treatment, such as treatment of lung cancer by the irradiation with betatron. Already in 1965, she published, in cooperation with her colleagues, an article on concomitant treatment of lung carcinoma, combining radiotherapy and chemotherapy, on the treatment of head and neck cancer with tele- and brachytherapy. She designed the irradiation methods and developed evaluation methodology for assessing treatment results. Her achievements in epidemiology are well-grounded and systematic; she was the principal investigator of numerous international research projects on lung cancer and on breast cancer. An important contribution to epidemiology is her article »Epidemiologic Aspects of Cancer«, in which she presented the epidemiologic methods to be applied in programming the cancer detection and its quality control. In her works, she also discussed the issues of organized anticancer campaign.

Her research results in individual fields of anticancer activity, like prevention, detection, diagnostics and therapy, rehabilitation and epidemiology paved the way for setting up oncology centers in Slovenia as well as in Europe; she was actively involved in anticancer campaigns also on the international level through World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Union Against Cancer (UICC). She was initiator as well as

founder and many years Head of the Cancer Registry of Slovenia, which was among the first population-based registry centers in Europe.

She was most eager in her endeavors to construct a new Institute or at least to add new buildings to the existing ones and to establish a functional comprehensive cancer center. In part, she almost fulfilled these set goals in the 1970s by the construction of Building TRT (teloradiotherapy). Regrettably, death came too early and prevented her to see her dreams of a new building coming true.

She drew up guidelines and directives how to organize, beside medical care, also research work at the Institute, and at the very beginning of her directorship, the Institute of Oncology was also given the status of a research institution by the decree issued by Ministry of Science and Technology.

She was very successful also in teaching. She designed the curriculum of the subject »Radiotherapy and Oncology« to be lectured at the Chair of Radiotherapy and Oncology of the Medical Faculty of Ljubljana and elaborated it with respect to multidisciplinary and team work. We now continue this approach and develop it further. She was chairing the Chair of Radiotherapy and Oncology from 1964 to 1982. She was initiator of the program on physical and biological fundamentals of radiotherapy and also worked on its implementation before it was launched at the Institute of Nuclear Sciences in Vinča (Serbia). She also designed and developed the first program for specialization in radiotherapy, which was at that time considered as a pioneering achievement also on the European level. In former Yugoslavia, she was one of the principal strategists in creating the policy against cancer. She chaired numerous committees and boards. In the 1970s, she was President of Cancerology Association of Yugoslavia. Her roles as mentor and counsellor are also of invaluable significance; she was mentor or counsellor to almost every col-

league of the then growing generation of oncologists in Yugoslavia, not only at the Institute of Oncology in Ljubljana or in Slovenia

Due to her merits, the Institute of Oncology is at present a large and up-to-date cancer center in Slovenia, a central medical, research and university institution for cancer treatment. She was the first editor-in-chief of the medical review »Radiologia Jugoslava« that started to appear in 1964 and, having acquired a strong international reputation, she was also invited to a number of editorial boards of medical journals abroad. Moreover, many local and international experts associations appointed her as member of honor or awarded her with orders of merit.

Though the saying goes »Nemo propheta in sua patria«, her productive and creative work was nevertheless highly appreciated by local community. Numerous medals awarded to her by the state and local public prizes bear witness of that. In 1974, she won the highest reward by the federal state, AVNOJ prize, in 1978 she was awarded with the Order of the Republic with Golden Laureate, she was appointed Member of Honor of the Cancerology Section of the Republic of Slovenia, of the Cancerology Association of Yugoslavia, of the Association of Medical Societies of Yugoslavia, and of the Slovenian Medical Association.

While unfolding her rich and productive life story, I may have left aside more than I have told about her; however, these few fragments of her life witness of the noble nature of Professor Božena Ravnihar who set off on a journey through life as partisan doctor and continued it as oncologist, Professor at the Medical Faculty of Ljubljana, initiator of anti-cancer campaigns and many years' Director General of the Institute of Oncology in Ljubljana - yet, first of all, she was compassionate and humane, having empathy for everyone of us, for the problems we had. She always found a moment or a word of support

for us when we were down, and never spared with blame or praise when we deserved it. Our Institute was her family. In the hearts of all of us, she was our Mum.

Professor Božena Ravnihar accomplished her mission. But she will stay among us as a legend. We shall keep her in our minds and hearts; anyhow, legends never die.

Zvonimir Rudolf