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RETROSPECTIVE

Lennart Philipson (1929–2011)

Kai Simons¹ and Iain W. Mattaj²

Lennart Philipson, a visionary leader and builder of life science research institutions, died on 26 June in Stockholm, Sweden. He began his career as a research scientist, but expanded his contributions in the building of robust research programs and institutions in Europe and the United States that set the tone and direction across many fields of the life sciences.

Lennart Philipson was born in 1929 in Stockholm. He received an M.D. degree in 1957 and a Ph.D. degree for studies on viruses of the respiratory tract in 1958, both from Uppsala University, Sweden. After a postdoctoral period at the Rockefeller University, his first major independent venture was in Uppsala where in 1968, as the first ever Professor of Microbiology in the Faculty of Natural Sciences, he founded the Wallenberg Laboratory, a future hotbed for molecular microbiology in Sweden and Europe. At that time, he was a world-leading virologist whose research focused on adenoviruses, a common cause of respiratory infections in humans. He unraveled how the virus infects cells, how its gene expression is regulated, and how it assembles.

His next station was Heidelberg, where in 1982 he succeeded John Kendrew to become the second director general of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL). Philipson furthered EMBL's success, for example, by establishing the first program in bioinformatics in Europe and the first public DNA sequence database. Philipson, like Kendrew, emphasized recruitment of young independent principal investigators and giving them the chance to prove themselves. This was a unique way to organize a research institution in mainland Europe at that time and set a model for others to follow. He strictly enforced turnover; since his tenure, roughly 90% of EMBL staff contracts end after 9 years. To those who questioned this policy, his standard response was: "EMBL is a place for those who prefer opportunity to security." In 1983, he also started the successful EMBL International Ph.D. Programme, which has trained scientific leaders from all around

the world. Today, the 4-year program has an annual intake of 50 Ph.D. students, with the current group representing over 40 different nationalities. Philipson created an unusually open atmosphere through his straightforward and pragmatic personality. He strolled around EMBL and exchanged a few words with everyone he met, from researchers to gardeners and workshop mechanics. The latter still speak with awe of the Viking—he was tall, imposing, and very Nordic. His wife Malin supported this free-flowing ambience, cooking delicious meals for both visitors and EMBL staff in their home.

As an impatient institute director, he was always looking for quick ways to raise money. Once he met with the minister president of Baden-Württemberg, Lothar Späth, to ask for a sizable contribution to extend the EMBL building, Späth had recently stopped smoking and renovated his office to get rid of the stench of tobacco and the accompanying temptation to light up. When discussion with Späth got difficult, Philipson lit his ever-present pipe. Späth panicked, suddenly remembering that he had another appointment, and without further ado, agreed to the millions EMBL had requested.

Philipson made a habit of fighting for funds. In Uppsala, he was known as "black Philip" and the Wallenberg Laboratory regularly exceeded their budget, but somehow Philipson always managed to secure the necessary funding. In 1992, he presented the EMBL member states with a new 5-year plan, asking to expand the budget by 15 to 20% above inflation. *Science* wrote of Philipson: "You're head of a lab that's ranked second in its field in Europe, with 3 years left in your contract—why not rest on your laurels and settle in for a quiet run to retirement?" Not Philipson; he fought for the budget increase and for a simplified system that would determine future EMBL funding by a two-thirds majority rather than unanimous decision. When the member states did not agree, Philipson decided to leave.

Immediately, he was offered the directorship of a new venture, the Skirball Institute

A virologist was instrumental in rejuvenating European biomedical research.



of Biomolecular Medicine at New York University. In 5 years he formed another world-class institution. Philipson used all his experience to yet again come up with a creative mix of disciplines and, through his charismatic personality, recruited young upcoming scientists to form a stellar faculty. He operated by a combination of setting rigorous academic standards and expectations and disregarding funding limits. After their stay at the Skirball, the Philipsons returned to Sweden. Lennart again left behind a thriving institution—the pattern he repeated successfully three times. He became an emeritus professor of Cell and Molecular Biology at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and remained engaged in research until his death at the age of 81.

Philipson also held high-level positions in the Swedish pharmaceutical industry and helped create a national biotechnology industry. He was instrumental in promoting the development of new antivirals for herpes virus. The gene encoding protein A, an important molecular reagent, was also cloned in his lab. His honors include memberships in the United States National Academy of Sciences, the Swedish Royal Academy of Science, and the award in 2003 of the Swedish Erik K. Fernström Prize for his pioneering virology work.

When relaxing from work, Lennart was an avid golfer and an expert yachtsman. Before he started his medical studies, he worked as a merchant seaman. Together with Malin, and his academic colleagues and close friends David Baltimore, Alice Huang, and Ralf and Erna Petterson, he pursued his maritime passion by cruising not only in his home waters but also on seas around the world.

Lennart Philipson will be remembered as someone who was always looking for new challenges and as a driving force in the internationalization and rejuvenation of European biomedical research. His uncompromising commitment to excellence and hard work was inspirational for the many young researchers he recruited and mentored.

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