The American Association of Immunologists
Oral History Project

Transcript

Olivera J. Finn, Ph.D.
May 5, 2012
Boston, MA

Interview conducted by
Brien Williams, Ph.D.

Transcription: TechniType Transcripts
Transcript copy editors: Bryan D. Peery and Elizabeth R. Walsh
Final edit by: John S. Emrich

To cite an interview, please use the following general format:

Williams: This is an interview for The American Association of Immunologists Centennial Oral History Project with Dr. Olivera, "Olja," Finn.

Finn: It's like an Oliver with an "a."

Williams: We are at the 99th annual [ed. 96th annual] meeting of the AAI at the Sheraton Boston Hotel in Boston, Massachusetts. Today is Saturday, May 5, 2012. I'm Brien Williams.

Dr. Finn, I'd like to start by asking you about your family background.

Finn: Yes. So I come from former Yugoslavia, which very quickly you will hear in my accent. Even after forty-three years in this country, it's still there. As soon as I say hello, people say, "Where are you from?" [laughs] The only people who don't hear my accent are my children.

So I came when I was eighteen, and I came to this country because I had met two years before an American student on a summer exchange program in Yugoslavia, and so we fell in love in 1966, the summer of 1966. He came back the fall of 1967 for a Fulbright scholarship in Belgrade. I was growing up and going to high school in Niš, which is south of Belgrade in what is now Serbia. At the end of, like, three days after I graduated high school, we got married, and two weeks later I ended up in this country with my whole family back in Yugoslavia at the time. So that was July 1968. By the end of August, we were on our way to California and continuing school training.

So then what happened was your plans never quite go the way you make them, so 1968 was a very difficult year in this country. If you remember, the spring we were planning our wedding, [Robert F.] Bobby Kennedy was killed, Martin Luther King [Jr.] was killed, Vietnam [War] was escalating. So when we arrived, having just gotten married—my husband was twenty-one years old, I was eighteen—he had gotten a deferment from the draft to study in Yugoslavia. As soon as we arrived, there was a notice from his recruiting board, and he was basically being recruited to go to Vietnam.

So he tried to claim hardship, a foreign wife, young wife, doesn't speak English, which was all true, but they didn't care, of course. So we continued to make plans for the possibility that he might be drafted. So one of the plans was that instead of waiting to be summoned to the Army, he actually took an exam with the U.S. Coast Guard for the reserve officers' candidacy and was one of two hundred young men of thousands that took that exam that year accepted.

So within six months of our stay in California, we started school. He was at Stanford [University]. I was at Foothill Junior College. We ended up, I with my in-laws in Indianapolis where he's from, and he in Yorktown in the Officer

Finn: Yes, he's in microelectronics. He's really a world expert in chips that impart vision capacity to robots and is a very talented man.

Williams: He's your only—

Finn: He's my only sibling, yes.

Williams: So what are the highlights of your time at Stanford?

Finn: Oh, Stanford was a very exciting place, and actually I developed both a love of immunology and cancer research there, because I ended up in the group in the lab of a very amazing man, Dr. Henry Kaplan, who, unfortunately, died relatively young, in his sixties, of lung cancer. But he was an early radiologist, and part of,

Levy, there are two things he did that were of interest to me and different than what I had trained on under Dr. Kaplan, because under Dr. Kaplan I did a lot of mouse work in leukemias and viruses and leukemic viruses, etc., so virology/immunology.

Ron was working in the human system, which was very interesting to me, human immunology. I continued to do a lot more human immunology than mouse modeling or very basic. I was more on the applied side of the science, because, again, because my mentors were similar to that. So I liked the fact that it was human immunology, and also Ron had come back from the Weizmann Institute from a fellowship there and again had been bitten by the immunology bug himself, and he was in the Department of Oncology, so he had the same combination, let's see what the immune system can do against cancer.

But interestingly, clearly the HLA of the cell was a determinant of whether or not you'd be able to recognize something, including a tumor antigen or viral antigen, and whether those antigens would be presented to the immune system. In HLA class II, for example, very little—while everything—not everything, but a lot had been discovered about these molecules in mice, very little had been done on human cells and human molecules, mostly because it was difficult to grow human cells and then we were beginning to be able to do that. Antibodies to these molecules on human cells had not really been developed to the large numbers that were available in mice, etc. So human HLA complex was still fairly undiscovered or not well understood, and so I actually worked in Ron's lab more understanding human HLA class II, which eventually would be very much applicable to understanding how tumor antigens are presenting, etc.

But with that background and that knowledge when I got to Duke, and actually Duke was attracted to me for that reason as well, was that I was in the Division of Immunology there with Bernard Amos as the chief of the division, who was a giant in HLA, human HLA, in fact. For the first few years that I was there, I was very much attracted to the research that was going on there in transplantation, because those were human HLA antigens, the rejection antigens in organ transplantation.

So I got very close to the transplant group at Duke that I didn't even know at Stanford. So you carry your research and you set up the lab, but you do look around to see what is going on around you and try to take that as well as one of the subjects that a lab would study. So, anyway, for a while I did both transplantation and tumor. I consider them totally two sides of the same coin, because transplantation basically tells you that the immune system can get rid of a whole kidney, so it should be able to do it with a little tumor, you know. So it's helpful as a tumor immunologist to actually know what's going on in transplantation.

for immunotherapy and a candidate vaccine for cancer prevention, etc., so it's an antigen called MUC1.

So that I discovered at Duke, and I actually published that in 1989 in *PNAS*, and I have a very yellow piece of paper, an article, where I was interviewed at Duke when that paper came out. They said, "So, Dr. Finn, when do you think that this may be tested in the clinic?"

So that was 1988. They were interviewing me just before the paper came out, and I said, "1993." Everybody says five years. And they looked at me like, "Okay, everybody says five years, 1993." But I also have another piece of paper, a yellow piece of paper, 1993, front page of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* announcing the first clinical trial in MUC1 cancer vaccines.

I talk to my students, may not be the right advice to give them, but I believe in sort of tenacity. If you really think that something's important, stay with it. A lot of time goes by before other people think it's important, but if you're convinced, that's what you as a scientist have to do. I mean, that's what we do. We're like artists, somebody's supporting us. Just sort of stay with it because it's up to you to finally prove that it's important, because there are lots of interesting things you can do. You can do a little bit of research here, a little bit there, a little bit there, and you'll be just sort of a well-published and well-educated person.

But I like it when people have sort of a brand on their forehead. If you say, "Olja Finn," and it's followed, "You know, the one that works on MUC1," I like that. I think why don't other people like MUC1? I don't really care, but they know what I do and what I stand for. And even if you follow just one subject, you have to know everything that's happening so that you can apply it to your line of research.

actually, now, and that is that there would be a molecule that has sort of repeating units so that it would crosslink T cell receptors, and those units would be very stable and look the same from one to the other, crosslink the receptors, activate the T cells, and the T cell will kill the tumor. So we had this picture of what the molecule would be like.

Simultaneously in the Biochemistry Department, the head of the Biochemistry Department, Bob Hill, was working on glycosylation of molecules, O-linkedp2(ol)-ame f1B5 T-10(

But Ron, every time he saw me—so finally I actually went to a meeting in Pittsburgh, and it was the first time that coming from the airport—I don't know if you've been to Pittsburgh, but you're in this beautiful hilly suburb, sort of, and

expectation that the next person should be from the outside. Now, there's also a practical reason, and that is the dean will always make a better deal for the person, not for himself or herself, with a person from the outside than a person from the inside. So the department will benefit more. So we have this self-serving as well as sort of idealistic reason to bring a person. If you bring a person from the outside, you have new talent, new infusion, certainly, because we all know what we do. So you bring something new, but you also bring resources that otherwise may not come to the department.

Williams: So in your twenty years at Pitt, just briefly, how's the funding gone? Has that been difficult? And what's your reputation at NIH, for example?

Finn: So I have been funded nonstop through NCI from the time I was at Duke, and then ACS [American Cancer Society], Leukemia Society, foundations. But my major funding has been NCI. So right now NCI is at 7 percentile, but they also dock you not having a pay line.

Williams: And that effort has continued beyond your presidency?

Finn: Yes, yes.

Williams: Good. We're nearing the end of our time here, but I definitely want you to talk about the role of women in science.

Finn: Yes. So I am actually giving a talk tomorrow hosted by—it's a roundtable session that we do at every AAI meeting, and we always have an invited speaker. So I'm invited this year to start it off. The title of the talk is "Make an Effort," sort of a secret to success in science, or something like that. It will be focused a lot on a few general comments about what "Make an Effort" stands for, but it will be focused a lot also on the role of women in science.

I have been very much involved in promoting women, just making sure that in every activity, scientific activity, in every meeting that's organized, every discussion that's held, every think tank that is put together, that people don't just put these things together because they remember friends' names and most of them will be the male friends' names, but to actually look at the list of women, of names of very competent, smart, great scientists. If you look by those criteria, many women's names will come to the surface.

So one of the ways that AAI deals with that, we have a Status of Women Committee, and we a postdoc you decided, “I’d better do this because I’ll have a child,” then that third year nobody is going to be inviting you to give a talk at AAI.

So I’m trying, with my students, with my trainees, with my colleagues, to say, “No. If this is what you want to do, this is what you want to do, and life will give you challenges and at that particular moment you find the solution, but then you go on.” There was a very interesting article in the *American Scientist* a few months ago, and I’ll focus a little bit on their findings in the talk.