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Research Scientist Gives \$105 Million to N.Y.U.

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA

A scientist who hid from the Nazis as a child, escaped a Communist regime, did pioneering medical research and made a fortune on a blockbuster drug will give \$105 million to the New York University School of Medicine, his professional home for four decades, university officials said yesterday.

The donation by the scientist, Jan T. Vilcek, 72, is one of the four or five largest ever given to a school or health care institution in New York City, and among the biggest in the nation, according to organizations that track such gifts. Dr. Vilcek, an immigrant who has no children, said he was giving most of his fortune to the medical school that has nurtured him and his work, and that cared for his wife, Marica, when she was seriously ill.

"I never expected that I would be in a position to have this kind of wealth," he said yesterday in a telephone interview from Santa Fe, N.M., where he is vacationing. "Immigrants don't usually come with big checkbooks. I came to this country with two suitcases full of useless stuff."

As a longtime employee of the institution receiving the gift, Dr. Vilcek, a professor of microbiology, stands in marked contrast to most major donors to universities and hospitals, who are either charitable foundations or moguls from unrelated businesses, people like Sanford I. Weill, Carl C. Icahn and Maurice R. Greenberg.

"I'm amazed by this gift," said Dr. Robert M. Glickman, dean of the medical school. "For him to put his good fortune back into the medical school, into medical research, is not only wonderful but unusual. It's the largest gift in the history of the medical school, and I think the largest by any faculty member to any school anywhere."

Dr. Vilcek headed a research team whose discoveries led to the development of Remicade, a drug used to treat Crohn's disease, rheumatoid arthritis and psoriatic arthritis. Scientists believe that the work also has implications for treating other diseases, like ulcerative colitis.

More remarkable, perhaps, than Dr. Vilcek's work at N.Y.U. is that he ever got there at all.

His Jewish family survived the long German occupation of Czechoslovakia and the Holocaust. Though they were forced from their comfortable apartment in Bratislava, and into a succession of smaller ones, they were, at first, passed over when many of Czechoslovakia's Jews were deported to concentration camps. When the campaign to round up and exterminate Jews intensified, they fled the city for the countryside.

"I spent the last year of the war with my mother in hiding, and my father somehow made his way through the front lines to the Russian Army," he said. "I was 11 at the time, and it still seemed like an exciting game of some sort. I was aware of the seriousness of the situation, but not completely."

The people who hid him were strangers in a village. "They were among those exceptional people who took great risks for others," he said. It was an experience, he added, that left a powerful impression about the value of helping people.

Years later, when Czechoslovakia was under Communist rule, his parents - his mother was an ophthalmologist and his father worked for a coal mining company - wanted him to become a doctor.

"I resisted it at first," he said. "I would have preferred another profession, but in a Communist country, the law was out of the question and economics was out of the question, because they were both too politicized."

After becoming a doctor and a research scientist, in 1964, when he was 31, Dr. Vilcek and his wife decided to escape.

"In those days you could not really leave, legally, so my wife and I received permission to visit Vienna for a weekend," he said. "We were able to get out that way, and we did not go back." In 1965, they settled in Manhattan, where they have lived ever since, and he went to work at N.Y.U.

Dr. Vilcek was one of the early researchers on interferon, one of the first immune system proteins discovered and manipulated by scientists. Since the early 1980's, he has worked with another immune protein, TNF-alpha, which is involved in fighting infections. Sometimes the immune system goes awry and produces too much TNF-alpha, causing the severe inflammation that inflicts pain and tissue damage in autoimmune diseases.

Dr. Vilcek and his colleagues developed a chemical that blocked TNF-alpha. Centocor, a pharmaceutical company now part of Johnson & Johnson, and the N.Y.U. scientists turned that discovery into infliximab, which Centocor sells as Remicade.

Remicade hit the market in 1998 and quickly became a major success. The resulting royalties made Dr. Vilcek a very rich man, as well as earning a large amount of money for the university. Sales of Remicade last year were close to \$2 billion, according to IMS Health, a consulting company that tracks drug sales, making it one of the 25 best-selling prescription drugs in the country.

N.Y.U. officials said Dr. Vilcek's gift was in three parts - a lump sum of cash, the rights to some future royalties, and a trust. The school declined to state the value of each part, but estimated the combined worth at \$105 million.

Most of the money will go toward the sort of basic research on microbes that Dr. Vilcek has done.

Dr. Glickman said it would be used to recruit scientists and upgrade laboratories. A portion of the money will go to the medical school's ear, nose and throat department.

According to the Greater New York Hospital Association, the largest gift to any medical institution in the city was a \$130 million bequest to Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn, from Donald and Mildred Othmer, in 2000.

Dr. Vilcek's may be the single biggest gift to a medical school in the city, according to both the hospital association and The Chronicle of Higher Education. Sanford and Joan Weill gave \$100 million to Cornell University's medical school in 1998, and another \$100 million in 2002. The school was renamed in their honor.

The donation by Dr. Vilcek ranks among the 30 largest ever given to a single college or university anywhere in the country, of which only a handful were specifically for medical work, according to a ranking maintained by The Chronicle of Higher Education.