

From the issue dated February 23, 2006

Couple's Philanthropy Honors the Achievements of Immigrants

By Caroline Preston

New York

Jan T. Vilcek and his wife, Marica, fled Communist Czechoslovakia in 1964 with two suitcases and the names of a few professional contacts in the United States. Now Dr. Vilcek, a New York University medical professor and co-inventor of the anti-inflammatory drug Remicade, and Ms. Vilcek, an art historian, have started an operating foundation to recognize the contributions of immigrants to America.

The couple donated \$4-million to the Vilcek Foundation this year, bringing its endowment to \$13-million. They have also pledged \$105-million to New York University's medical school, which Dr. Vilcek credits for taking "a risk" in hiring him as a young researcher more than 40 years ago. According to New York University, the pledge is the largest gift ever to the School of Medicine and is believed to be the biggest contribution from an active faculty member to an American medical school.

"We feel very fortunate that this country has treated us very well and given us wonderful opportunities," says Dr. Vilcek, 72. "It's a way for us to show our appreciation."

The Vilceks created the foundation in 2000, two years after Remicade went on the market. Sales of the drug, which is used to fight rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, and other inflammatory ailments, totaled about \$2-billion in the United States each year, according to IMS Health, a company that tracks pharmaceutical sales. The foundation receives a percentage of Dr. Vilcek's royalties from the drug each year.

Arts, Medical Research

In its first years, the foundation focused on supporting established medical and arts organizations, such as the New York University medical school and the Santa Fe Opera, in New Mexico. But as its assets grew, the Vilceks decided they also wanted to incorporate their own experiences into its giving.

To that end, they have created annual awards of \$50,000 each to foreign-born Americans who have made significant contributions in the Vilceks' areas of professional interest: medical research and the arts.

The Vilceks have also purchased a 5,000-square-foot Manhattan town house they hope will serve both as the foundation's administrative headquarters and as a cultural center to exhibit the work of young artists, many of them immigrants.

Dr. Vilcek says that the shift in the foundation's focus stemmed from a desire to ensure the couple's donations had a visible impact. By recognizing foreign-born Americans who have realized significant achievements since immigrating to the United States, the Vilceks hope they can provide role models to younger immigrants.

"Even though the endowment is growing, we realized that it will never reach the size of the Howard Hughes foundation or some of the organizations that support research, and we wanted to find a niche — something unique," he says. "We feel that the emphasis on the contributions of immigrants is different from what other foundations do. We can probably make a dent with relatively modest means."

Earlier this year, the foundation announced it would award its first science prize to Joan Massagué, a Spanish-born cancer researcher who works at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, in New York. The artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who are Bulgarian- and Moroccan-born, respectively, will share the arts and culture award.

The awards ceremony is scheduled for next month. Ms. Vilcek says the foundation's board members chose the husband-and-wife team of

Christo and Jeanne-Claude because of their democratic approach to art. The couple's most recent project, a massive installation in Central Park known as "The Gates," drew people who might not have been able to afford admission fees to museums or were intimidated by their sometimes stuffy atmosphere, says Ms. Vilcek.

The biggest challenges of planning an awards program have been keeping costs low and honing the judging criteria, says Bruce Cronstein, a colleague of Dr. Vilcek's at New York University and a foundation trustee.

The foundation's executive director, Rick Kinsel, has tried to keep the costs of publicizing the awards from exceeding the amount of money spent on the awards themselves.

This year the Vilceks and the foundation's three other board members chose the winners. In the future, the couple plans to set up a committee to choose the candidates and to include past winners in the selection process.

Dr. Vilcek is also concerned about increased barriers to legal immigration since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He hopes that the awards can remind people of how much the United States relies on immigrants to be competitive, particularly in the sciences.

Benjamin Johnson, director of the Immigration Policy Center at the American Immigration Law Foundation, agrees that achievement awards can be an effective way to recast discussions about immigration in a positive light. For about a decade, the foundation has been giving awards to immigrants, each year focusing on the achievements of a particular immigrant group.

"They help us create a more conducive environment to talk about what is the right way to solve the problems we have today about immigration," he says. "It's particularly inspiring when it comes from people who had the same experience and know firsthand how transforming it is to be an immigrant."

The Vilceks' own stories serve as reminders of the positive

contributions of first-generation Americans.

Dr. Vilcek grew up in a Jewish family in Bratislava. He fled with his mother to the countryside during the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in World War II, and a family of strangers took them in.

"There were German soldiers sometimes coming in and out," he says. Dr. Vilcek's father, an executive at a coal-mining company, was separated from the family and made his way through the front lines to the Russian army. He was reunited with his wife and young son about eight months later.

Today, Dr. Vilcek remains in touch with the family that sheltered him, from whom he says he learned the importance of helping others. He also credits his mother, an ophthalmologist, for instilling in him a generous spirit.

"I remember her saying to me that she had a hard time taking money from patients because she believed they needed money more than she," he says.

Dr. Vilcek at first resisted the idea of becoming a doctor, but gave in to parental pressure when he realized that journalism and law — two professions he would have preferred — were too heavily influenced by Communist politics. He applied to medical school "at the last moment," he says, and went on to receive medical and doctoral degrees from two institutions in Bratislava.

In the early 1960s, he met his future wife through mutual friends. The couple soon decided they would escape.

"It was just the sheer stupidity of the Communist ideology that made your life miserable," says Dr. Vilcek. "Every morning when you came to work there was a session from a political commissar telling you of the latest developments. And of course you couldn't travel and there were restrictions on what books were available."

Ms. Vilcek, 69, a slender, blonde woman who is slightly taller than her husband, says their safe departure was hardly assured.

Her father had lost his land and his job with the ministry of education when the Communist regime came to power. Her older brother had already fled to the United States, creating political problems for the rest of the family. Ms. Vilcek says that had she not married and changed her name, she probably would never have been granted permission to travel.

In 1964, the couple obtained visas to visit Vienna for the weekend, and seized the opportunity to slip through the Iron Curtain.

In their early years in America, the Vilceks had no intention of ever returning to their homeland and rarely reminisced about their youth there. (They have since, however, returned for visits.)

In order to thrive in the United States, they say, immigrants need to make a conscious effort to adjust.

"We know many immigrants who have lived most of their lives in the past, and they always compare their present life to their past life, and it's us and them," says Dr. Vilcek. "Somehow you have to get over that stage in order to feel comfortable here."

'The Good Old Days'

Despite arriving in the United States with virtually nothing, the couple remember their first years in New York with fondness. They moved into a small, one-bedroom apartment near New York University, and used some of their first paychecks to buy furniture from the Salvation Army and a secondhand Volkswagen Beetle they parked on the street.

"Those were the good old days," says Dr. Vilcek.

Dr. Vilcek began work at the university as an assistant professor of microbiology, and Ms. Vilcek soon found a job as a clerk-typist in the library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She remembers how friendly people were during the job search. Even the director of the Frick Collection called to give her advice on tailoring her résumé, she says.

Ms. Vilcek, who has a degree from Comenius University in art history, was able to use her education and skills to quickly climb the museum's ranks. She retired eight years ago as an associate curator.

"This country gives opportunity if you have luck and take the opportunity," she says. Such opportunity was rare in Czechoslovakia, she adds, where people were often discouraged from trying to excel.

At New York University, Dr. Vilcek became one of the first researchers to work on interferon, a protein produced by the cells of the immune system.

In the 1980s, he turned his focus to another immune protein, TNF-alpha, which fights infection. The immune system sometimes produces an excess of TNF-alpha, however, causing inflammation and chronic diseases like arthritis. Dr. Vilcek and his laboratory helped generate an antibody that could block the protein, which became the basis of Remicade.

Dr. Vilcek says that using his royalties to benefit the medical school, which he credits for giving him the freedom to pursue his research interests, was a natural choice. The money will support research and education in the departments of microbiology and otolaryngology.

The gift will be received in three parts: an initial cash payment, of which \$6.7-million has been paid; a charitable remainder trust; and quarterly payments that will continue until 2018. As Dr. Vilcek's employer at the time he helped discover Remicade, New York University already receives its own royalty payments from the discovery of the drug.

Robert Glickman, the dean of the medical school, says that a gift of that size from a professor, as opposed to a donor outside the institution, has boosted morale and sent a positive message to faculty, students, and others about the quality of the medical school.

"It's an expression of faith," he says.

Flexible Philanthropy

Willing to adapt to life in the United States, the Vilceks are taking a similarly flexible approach to their philanthropy. They view the foundation's new programs as experiments that they can continue to modify.

Ms. Vilcek, for whom the foundation has become a full-time job, says: "If some of it doesn't work out, we hope we will have enough flexibility to change it and readjust."

The Vilceks and other board members, for instance, continue to draft ideas for the foundation's new cultural center. They hope it will become a gathering place for young artists, and perhaps offer lectures, films, musical performances, and poetry readings. It might also provide opportunities for students to conduct research on the contributions of foreign-born Americans to U.S. society.

One firm goal is that the cultural center will be more nimble in its programs than established museums, says Ms. Vilcek, which often plan their exhibitions five years in advance.

Dr. Vilcek, who says he plans to continue working "as long as the university tolerates me," says that none of his colleagues have been surprised by his desire to add more work to an already hectic schedule. "This is New York," he explains.

Except for ski trips and visits to the Santa Fe Opera, the Vilceks spend most of their leisure time in the city where they have lived for more than four decades. Sunday is their "museum day" and art collecting their shared passion, says Ms. Vilcek. Dr. Vilcek, the scientist, is often more emphatic about what pieces he thinks they should buy than his wife, who spends more time mulling her purchases. ("I could get more discipline in acquisition," allows Ms. Vilcek.) Their Manhattan apartment is decorated primarily with the couple's art, which focuses on pre-Columbian pieces and early-20th century American painting.

In philanthropy, however, Dr. Vilcek has found that he is sometimes less decisive than in art collecting. In response to the publicity generated by his donation to New York University, he began to receive phone calls at his office from organizations seeking support.

"Clearly you can't support every individual and every organization," he says. "You have to make decisions, and those are difficult decisions."