

PROFILE

BY CHRIS TACHIBANA

Mikael Kubista

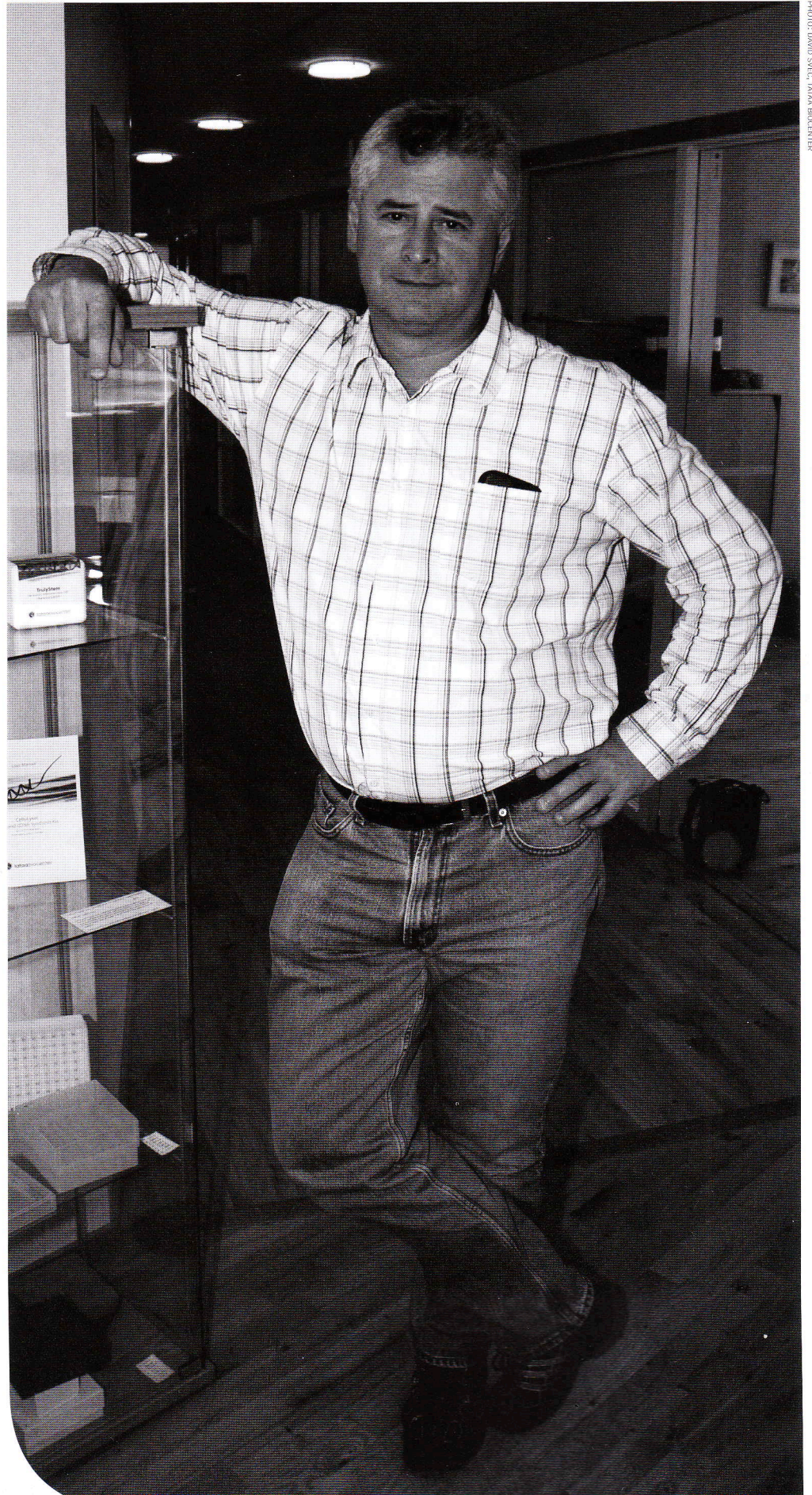


PHOTO: DAVID SIFU, TAMA BOCENTEN

Science and humanitarian work sparked by chance

International events turned Mikael Kubista into a worldwide entrepreneur and advisor.

Chance and global politics have changed Mikael Kubista's life twice - so far.

Kubista was born in the former Czechoslovakia, but went to Sweden when he was 7 years old. "In 1968, my father, a medical doctor, was on a scholarship in Sweden. While we were here visiting him on vacation, the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia so we stayed. It was one of those things that happen by chance that change your life."

ONE OF THE PREMIUM THINKERS

Six years later, Kubista was a Swedish citizen. He earned a PhD in Chemistry from Chalmers University of Technology in Göteborg, and trained in laboratories in the United States and Australia. Back in Sweden, he founded several companies around polymerase chain reaction (PCR) technology, a laboratory method for replicating DNA in a test tube that is used in research and diagnostic applications from hospitals to crime labs. Kubista's companies include MultiD Analysis, a major provider of PCR analysis software, and the TATAA Biocenter, headquartered in Göteborg, which provides courses and services in quantitative PCR.



TATAA laboratory.

Professor Michal Pfaffl, Department of Physiology, Technical University of Munich, is a leading innovator in qPCR, and calls Kubista "one of the premium thinkers" in the field. "For 8 years we've worked together organizing meetings and collaborating in trainings, and we have published around

five papers together. He's a very nice guy and especially knowledgeable about techniques in diagnostics - and he's very well connected in the qPCR field."



Top row (left to right): Jens Björkman, Robert Sjöback, Jenny Jacobsson, Greta Johannesson, Abdalla Elbergli (MENA Diagnostics), David Švec.

Bottom row (left to right): Anne Hansen, Kristina Lind, Linda Strömbom, Mikael Kubista.

A LIBYAN CONNECTION

Kubista is also linked to Libya, thanks to a chance encounter and international politics. In 1991, Abdalla Elbergli, then a Libyan graduate student at Bristol University in the United Kingdom, dropped in on Kubista, who was on the faculty at Chalmers University. As Kubista describes it, “One day about 20 years ago, this guy came to my lab because he was in Sweden visiting a colleague in a different department. We chatted for about a half-hour. A few years later, he showed up outside my door again.” Elbergli was now a refugee. He says, “After finishing my PhD in 1996, I returned first to my home country Libya, but after a short period of time - about 3 months, it was unsafe to stay.” Elbergli did postdoctoral research with Kubista leading to an associate professor position at Chalmers, and became a Swedish citizen. In the late 1990s, relations between Libya and Western countries began to normalize, and in 2002, Elbergli and Kubista founded MENA Diagnostics, a distributor of research equipment and supplies to Libya. In 1999, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) started an initiative to set up the International Biotechnology Research Center near Tripoli, financed by the Libyan government, with

Kubista as a scientific advisor. “We were one of first groups to enter the country, to oversee setting up the research center,” says Kubista. “The humanitarian objective was to help train researchers, and set up the biotech center as base for research and for development of healthcare and diagnostics infrastructure.”

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Kubista’s PCR expertise is perfect for investigating North African strains of HIV and hepatitis viruses. Commercially available diagnostics kits are developed by European or American companies and focus on viral strains common in those regions. The biotechnology center uses PCR to study the viral strains of Libya with the long-term goal of developing better diagnostic tests for the country. Kubista and colleagues give general health advice in Libya as well, helping set up swine flu testing during the 2009 outbreak, and being a voice of reason to the Libyan government when neighboring Egypt slaughtered all its pigs during the epidemic. Although coordinated by UNESCO, the work is “very much a volunteer mission,” says Kubista. “UNESCO pays for plane tickets, but you give your time because you want to make a difference.”

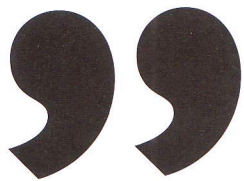
Recent upheaval in Libya has halted

work at the biotechnology center, which is in “a region where there is a lot of fighting, where things are really bad,” says Kubista. Many of his collaborators escaped, including Elbergli, who is using the MENA Diagnostics transportation connections to send humanitarian aid. “We are trying to help our people in Libya in this difficult time,” says Elbergli, “sending medical supplies and milk for babies through our contact in Malta, who runs regular vessels to Misurata in Libya.” Another concern is the uncertain future of approximately 200 Libyan graduate students who are studying in other countries, with around 20 in Sweden. “They used to be financed by the Libyan government,” says Kubista, “but that has been frozen. However, most universities have found stipends for them.”

AND A RETURN TO EASTERN EUROPE

Kubista’s global involvement goes beyond Libya. He is also involved in exchange programs and training courses for researchers in Egypt and Iran supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), and in Hungary supported by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

He is also working in his birth country, now the Czech Republic. “It took a long



The humanitarian objective was to help train researchers, and set up the biotech center as base for research and for development of health care and diagnostics infrastructure.”

time until I was allowed to go back, but that was solved and I had some collaborations with teams in the Czech Republic,” he says. In 2007 the country applied for European Union infrastructure funds for a new biotechnology institute at the Academy of Sciences in Prague, where Kubista was given a part-time position. The TATAA Biocenter now has a branch in Prague, offering training courses now, and possibly contract services in the future.

Work in Sweden and the Czech Republic is increasingly demanding, as the TATAA Biocenter develops new qPCR-related

courses and services. However, Kubista is not giving up on Libya, in spite of uncertainty about the country’s future, and the fact that his current concern is just making sure his Libyan colleagues are safe. Once global events tie him to a community, he stays connected. When asked if he will eventually continue his work in Libya, he answers “definitely.” ◊

Name: Mikael Kubista.

Positions: CEO, TATAA Biocenter, Sweden; Head, Dept of Gene Expression Profiling, Biotechnology Institute, Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic; Advisor for UNESCO; Scientific advisory board member for the International Biotechnology Research in Tripoli, Libya

Born: 1961, Podborany, Czechoslovakia (Swedish citizen since 1974)

Education: 1984 Göteborg University, B. Sc. Chemistry; 1988 Chalmers University of Technology, Ph.D. Chemistry.

Currently: Married with three children.

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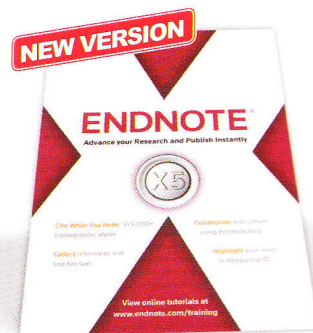
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