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Robert Bárány

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Professor Robert Bárány won the Nobel Prize in 1914, for elucidating the function of semi-circular canals. The news reached him in a Russian prisoner-of-war camp. This paper recounts his scientific contributions and his eventful life.

Robert Bárány was born 22nd April 1876, in Vienna, Austria. He studied medicine there before training under the renowned Otologist, Professor Politzer. Whilst syringing ears in clinic, he noted that some patients suffered a transient vertigo, with nystagmus, in response to the injection of water. He recounted in his Nobel speech, "Chance then came to my aid," when a patient asked if the water could be warmed. The hot water induced vertigo - and nystagmus in the opposite direction. From this, Bárány went on to deduce semi-circular canal function, and the connection with cerebellar positional control. Other contributions to ENT include the Bárány noise-box and the Bárány chair.

Bárány had an eventful and colourful life. Sigmund Freud once rejected Bárány as a pupil because "he seemed too abnormal". Bárány was an army surgeon in World War I, and was captured with his unit and sent to a Russian prisoner-of-war camp. He received the news of his Nobel Prize whilst a prisoner, and his freedom was only secured after personal diplomatic efforts from Prince Carl of Sweden.

The deductions that Bárány made regarding semi-circular canal function built on the work of his predecessors, and marked a leap forward in our understanding of vestibular function. We will trace the character, life and science of this prolific Otolaryngologist.