Bernardo Houssay (1887-1971) was born in Buenos Aires. A precocious youngster, he was admitted to the School of Pharmacy at the University of Buenos Aires at 14 years of age and graduated in 1904. He was appointed Professor of physiology at the School of Veterinary Medicine. Houssay entered medical school at the University of Buenos Aires and obtained his MD degree in 1911 for his thesis on physiological activity of hypophysis. In 1919, he occupied the chair of physiology in the medical school as the first full-time Professor in an Argentine University. He transformed and directed it into highly respected research department of international class.

During WW-II in 1943, the military government deprived him of the post due to his liberal political ideas and for taking too firm a pro-American stand, at a time when Argentina was close with the German Nazis. Thus Houssay was forced to re-establish his research lines and staff at the privately funded Institute of Biology and Experimental Medicine. This situation, reinforced by the second dismissal by the Peronista government in 1945, was prolonged until 1955.

Houssay worked in many fields of physiology, but his main contribution was on the investigation of the role of anterior pituitary in the carbohydrate metabolism. The far reaching importance of the effect of tiny pituitary gland and its relation to body growth was clearly realised only during the first decade of 20th century. Its effect on pancreas, although surmised, was little understood and investigated before Houssay’s work. A year after the discovery of insulin, he organised a systematic study of the influence of endocrine glands on its activity in his laboratory.

The anterior lobe of pituitary seemed to produce at least one hormone that had an effect opposite to that of insulin. Removal of the pituitary from the diabetic animal reduced the severity of diabetes. On the other hand, injection of pituitary extract increased the severity of diabetes, or produced a diabetic condition, where one did not exist before. This interlocking of hormonal effect on diabetes was clearly demonstrated by Houssay in 1930s. His work was recognised by the Nobel Committee and he shared the 1947 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine with Carl and Getty Cori for their work on catalytic conversion of glycogen.

About Houssay receiving the Nobel Prize, the controlled Argentinean press,
instead of rejoicing at this first award to a Latin-American, complained that the award was politically motivated. As a blow to Dictator Juan Peron, Houssay responded that “one must not confuse little things (Peron) with big things (Nobel Prize)”. In 1955, after Peron was ousted, Houssay was reinstated as Professor Director of the Institute of Physiology in the University, and from 1957 onwards became the director of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council. His discoveries stimulated the study of hormonal feedback control mechanism which is central to all aspects of modern endocrinology and helped later workers in establishing very important role of Pituitary gland as a “general co-coordinator”, and a master gland for hormones produced elsewhere.