

IN MEMORIAM

## In Love with Microsporidia for 60+ Years: Jiří Vávra Passed Away

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THE eminent Czech scientist Jiří Vávra, born in 1933, passed away on October 1, 2018 in the small central Bohemian city of Nižbor, where he lived in retirement with his wife Alena and families of their children. A biologist by soul, parasitologist by profession, protistologist and microscopist by heart, Jiří was our teacher (scientific “father” for J.L. and scientific “grandfather” for M.H.), who later became a dear friend. Jiří was one of the last students of Otto Jírovec, the father of Czech parasitology, and he liked to remember the old days.

Jiří’s life-long passion was clear—the microsporidia! He got his first microscope at the age of 14, an expensive present in those days and he instantly loved it. He did not waste time and at the age of 16, he visited the Faculty of Sciences of Charles University and managed to convince Jírovec to take him into his laboratory, already as a secondary school student. In his almost 70-yr-long scientific career, Jiří did research on various protists, with focus on ciliates, gregarines, and especially microsporidia. He was generally fascinated with miniaturization, so maybe thanks to their general reductiveness, microsporidia became the subject of most of Jiří’s research.

In the late 50s, Jiří became enchanted by electron microscopy and remained so for good. Hence, when we came for the first time to his room which served both as an office and as a laboratory, we instantly liked the atmosphere and the smell of books, chemicals, and specimens. Jiří asked us to study the life cycles and ultrastructure of microsporidia parasitizing mosquitoes (J.L.) and crustaceans (M.H.). We indulged in it and learned a lot from Jiří in the process not only about science but also about life in general. Even in the bleak 80s of the Czechoslovak real-socialism, at the Department of Parasitology headed by Jiří, the atmosphere was liberal, open-minded, western-oriented, and peppered with Švejk-ian jokes. In the messy basement of the faculty’s building, Jiří was known, along with Josef Chalupský, Jaroslav Weiser, and Jaroslav Kulda, as an enthusiastic teacher of the handful of



parasitology students, whom he was also always ready to help in their careers, for example, protecting them from various stupidities of the regime. Equipped with an outstanding memory (which lasted until his last days), Jiří remembered who published what and where decades ago, liked to chat in several languages in which he was fluent, cherished the only electron microscope around and became something like its guardian. Especially in spring (the season of daphnia and other water bugs, his favorite microsporidian hosts), he frequently took to the field, which he enjoyed a lot. Moreover, Jiří had an extraordinary ability to build bridges between people, and with a gentle touch had a significant impact on the life of all his students.

Another aspect of Jiří’s personality was that he was not only an expert on parasites and protists in particular, but was also an exceptional observer of the human spirit, its strengths and weaknesses, including his own, being deeply concerned about the human condition. Perhaps as a consequence, he was a conciliatory person, which is in the scientific world full of egos rather exceptional. Spending most of his time in real-socialism Jiří was, thanks to his contacts with “the West,” very much aware of his poverty. He never complained about it, just became extremely frugal, and retained everything for a possible reuse. His correspondence, all his specimens, electron and light micrographs, and reprints, including the valise with which he returned from a post doc stay in France in 1969, were meticulously kept in his room. At scientific meetings, he

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repeatedly shared hotel rooms with one of us (M.H.) in the cheapest available accommodation and the saved money was used for chemicals or the next meeting. Jiří was able to combine, in a unique way, such aspects as an expertise for excellent wines with modesty; during his work stays in České Budějovice, he frequently slept on an extended sofa in the laboratory, rather than in a guest room with corresponding amenities, which he deemed as unnecessary luxury. He was also used to going on field trips by trains and buses, dragging all the equipment including containers with collected water with him, up to his 70s. These days, when most junior students request a lot in order to just start working, such a modest behavior should at least be remembered as inspirational.

After he reached the retirement age, Jiří had a hard time leaving the laboratory. To postpone that, he decided to learn molecular biology and started pipetting. He moved his operations from Charles University in Prague to the Institute of Parasitology of the Czech Academy of Sciences in České Budějovice. There, he collaborated with Miroslav Oborník, Ivan Fiala, and one of us (J.L.), and especially in later years became closely attached to the group of electron microscopy enthusiasts headed by Jana Nebesářová. Moreover, Jiří taught protistology at the neighboring University of South Bohemia until the age of 83 and his lectures were very highly rated by students. His “Budweis connection” grew progressively stronger, which was reflected in his frequent visits, mentoring of students, and publication output.

A dedication of Jiří for science that lasted till the end can be captured in the following personal recollection. In 2017, at the protistology congress in Prague (ICOP 15), Jiří was giving a plenary talk (we kindly refer the reader to a witty and wise description of the first ICOP meeting co-organized by Jiří in 1961 published in *J. Euk. Microbiol.* in

2018). Just a few minutes before the start, when everything was prepared and the hall hummed, Jiří took one of us (J.L.) aside and told him that he does not feel well and is not sure whether he will be able to finish the 45 min-long lecture. He passed a copy of the text and said that in case he would collapse, J.L. shall take his place right away and finish the lecture from wherever Jiří ended. He stressed that J.L. will ignore what is happening to “Jiří’s body, as this will be the concern of others,” because “the show must go on.” Following the solemn promise that J.L. will do exactly as told, the kind reader can imagine how happy he was when Jiří finished his talk just fine.

Throughout his life, Jiří has been in an intense contact with colleagues from countries around the world (nothing unusual now, but a true rarity in real-socialism), deeply enjoying cooperations and mutual visits. He communicated in Russian with Irma Issi and others, in French with Joseph Schrével and others, in English with many colleagues from the US (Mike McManus, Lee Solter, etc.) and other countries (Rony Larsson from Sweden, etc.). Jiří liked to say that this way he learned much more about a microsporidium isolated from a Scandinavian, Alpine or Middle East lake than just what was published.

Jiří finished his last paper (a description of the microsporidian genus *Minutissima*) just 2 days before passing away. During those last days, one of us (J.L.) visited Jiří and his wife Alena in their very pleasant house, where he was told—“... on this paper, my name will be accompanied by the small note—deceased—and that is perfectly OK”. After a relatively short illness, Jiří, at the age of almost 86, left us in great spirits (he liked to say something along these lines “How I envy you guys—this is a golden age for science...”). We are deeply saddened by the loss of Jiří yet cherish his memory. His impact on the Czech and Slovak parasitology and the world of protozoology is ever lasting.