

## MY CZECH MATE

“But where are the chickens? In my country, small villages like these have lots of chickens roaming around the hedgerows and lanes. Sometimes, it’s becoming quite dangerous to drive without knocking them down. I suppose that here you lock them up, out of the way of the increasing amount of traffic. It’s a sign of changing society, what some call progress. It must reduce their freedom and their enjoyment of life.” He felt strongly, with emotion.

I was driving along minor roads of the English countryside in the Spring of 1968, taking Zlatko to my research locality of what turned out to be Miocene strata of the Brassington Formation in Derbyshire. It was Zlatko’s first visit to the West, on a scientific exchange scholarship that we shared, and which would take me on my first trip to Czechoslovakia later that summer. Earlier in the year Zlatko had spent a few months in India, at the Birbal Sahni Research Institute at Lucknow. There were plenty of chickens in the streets as well as plenty of experience of life under an occupying power. We had grown up taking many of these habits for granted and in these visits to new places they were being challenged for the first time. For Zlatko, the differences were pretty extreme, switching in a few years from the Nazis to the Soviets, from a political party of fascism to another of communism. In both systems you soon learn to look out for party members roaming in the streets, peering around the corners of the houses. The peculiar thing about Zlatko and myself was that despite being brought-up in different systems (he with these two extremes and in the same occupied country, me with just one system of liberal democracy) we still shared the same beliefs in middle-of-the-road life-styles.

As I got to know Zlatko it became clear that he and other Czech scientists were being deprived of harnessing their great intellectual potential. They received very little investment and even less appreciation by their managers, the government and its society. His office was in a romantic old building in Spálená, surprisingly made up of inner glass walls with metal frame partitions. It did a lot for beauty but little for the work.

Zlatko was well-known in Praha for the prim little blue *Škoda* that he drove circuitously and mysteriously around the back-streets of the Old and New Town. Everywhere he went, from Institute to Museum, from one laboratory to another office, from a bar to a restaurant, his *Škoda* seemed to follow. He specially loved driving into the countryside of Bohemia, from one brown-coal mine to another, staying at old hotels or boarding-houses, exchanging good wishes with the many locals as though they were close friends. He had a confident manner mixed with a boyish enthusiasm for whatever the business needed. There were jokes, stories, and time for listening and understanding. He got results quickly, fairly, sensibly, whether he was looking for specimens, understanding scientific articles, booking a hotel room, buying a beer.

Clearly, he enjoyed the science involved in these activities, especially seeking out the features of extinct plants and linking them to the living equivalents. This involved finding common features and reconstructing patterns in plant structure and in the relationships between species. It was intricate detective work. The finger-prints used by forensic scientists were equivalent to the epidermal and stomatal cell outlines that Zlatko found in the leaf cuticle. Sherlock Holmes’ magnifying glass was swapped by the light microscopes and scanning electron microscopes that Kvaček used so skilfully. In the fossils he found detail in the outlines and the shapes of leaves and other organs such as seeds, wood and flowers. He brought together evidence from these and other specialists.

But something was missing. Isolated in the inward culture of the 1950s and ‘60s, the Czech palaeontologists were not encouraged to look outside from their own expertise. They were not encouraged to travel or contact other scientists and they were not using the new technology that others were finding so useful. They were stuck back in the tradition of central Europe’s prize palaeobotanists Ettingshausen, Kräusel, Gothan and Weyland. They had not heard of the 1950s argument between the new DNA geneticists and the classical taxonomists. That was most loudly enacted between Jim Watson (he of Watson & Crick DNA fame) and E. O. Wilson (the Nobel prize winning ant specialist) at a lecture in the United States, when Watson publicly called Wilson a “stamp collector” and one of Watson’s supporters poured a bucket of cold water over Wilson’s head. It was time for different specialists to talk and share evidence with one another.



**Text-fig. 1. Celebration of Christmas 1966 in Lucknow, India (Zlatko Kvaček with two unknown women). Private archives of J. Kvaček.**



**Text-fig. 2. Visit to Mrs. Boulter in Leicester, United Kingdom, spring 1968. Private archives of J. Kvaček.**



**Text-fig. 3.** Zlatko Kvaček and Michael Boulter during the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Geological Congress, Prague, August 1968. Private archives of J. Kvaček.

to Moscow and was soon replaced. The population of Czechoslovakia knew they must resign to more of the Soviet style of living.

I spent many evenings through the 1980s in Prague restaurants with the palaeontology community. On one special occasion there was Blanka Pačtová, Magda Konzalová-Mazancová and the students (Antonín) Tonda Hlušík, Miroslav Krůta. We gathered in the spirit of J. Hašek's *Good Soldier Švejk*, and laughter, and once we sang the Czech national anthem like they did with *La Marseillaise* in Humphry Bogart's film *Casablanca*. I tried to keep connections with them to the lightness of open free thinking.



**Text-fig. 4.** Zlatko Kvaček and Magda Konzalová in the Geological Institute in Prague Suchbát, 1984. Private archives of J. Kvaček.

needed to test any theory of biological relationships. If that theory tests positive then other data from the fossils, or the environment etc. are needed to give more support; and so on and on. It's what Zlatko did with our data from Mull and from Svalbard and what he did from many other evidence elsewhere. From the early 1990s he had scores of these collaborative projects, some of which had gestated in his mind for some time, some developed more spontaneously.

Through his strength and determination, his high intelligence and his loving family, Zlatko Kvaček turned this tempestuous time and place given for his life into an opportunity for peace and understanding. He had learnt how to be patient and how to listen for all the evidence from all the disciplines. Only that way will we learn why and how the chickens cross the road.

In Prague, and central Europe, Zlatko Kvaček was one of the first palaeontologist to recognise this. He had his first opportunity to show this holistic approach as a principal organiser of palaeontology at the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Geological Congress, hosted in Prague in August 1968. Famously, the congress was interrupted by the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops and so Zlatko's mission was overshadowed. His contemporaries from central Europe became a very strong supporting group, very close as friends, including Harald Walther, Deiter Mai, Erwin Knobloch, Čestmír Bůžek and Oldřich Fejfar. But it was hard to maintain confidence and a creative outlook about something that seemed so far away: patterns of evolution in the plant kingdom.

The following winter another calamity swept Kvaček's world, stimulated by an ice hockey match in Prague between Czechoslovakia and Russia. Czechoslovakia won 4–3. Once again, I happened to be in Prague and watched the televised match in a very rowdy Prague restaurant. After the game we all marched down to Václavské náměstí, full of emotionally charged demonstrators. Inevitably the crowd got out of order, the Russian Airline office was ransacked, the Prime Minister was sent

But life was much more difficult after these events of 1969. For many millions, including Kvaček, it was painfully hard to live.

Zlatko lost himself in his work. He knew a lot about evolution, and he knew that the best evidence was sourced from many disciplines, from palaeoecology, palaeoclimate, leaf shape, organs, stomata and much more. I know it from my own work with him on Mull and Spitzbergen.

It was easy for Zlatko to throw himself into his work for the twenty years up to 1989 when a third big international political event effected his professional activities. This was the peaceful overthrow of the Soviet regime in Prague through December of that year. Zlatko's full list of publications shows just how much data he had accumulated by then, with no easy ways of getting it off his chest. Suddenly and unexpectedly, he became very busy writing.

This is how science works, though at its best without the stimulus of serious political events. The postage stamps, or the more beautiful fossils, have to be collected, described and named. Nowadays the geneticist does the same with the very long sequences of just four nucleotide bases, cytosine, guanine, adenine and thymine. These data are the building blocks

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