

IN MEMORIAM OF MILAN RUŽIČKA

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Sadly, an unavoidable event we wish we could prevent, occurred. Prof. RNDr. Milan Ružička, DrSc., Dr.h.c. passed away on the 7th of October, 2024. Even though our contact over the last few years has been clipped, those of us who had known him for decades feel he was here with us still, and, regardless of it sounding a bit pathetic, we believed he would never actually leave. And even as he managed to live up to the rate old age of 95, the end of his earthly existence shook us all.

A dutiful account of all of his varied scientific and organisational activities has already been given and published, surely with many possible reviews to follow. I would rather like to use this opportunity to share some memories regarding Milan Ružička as a colleague, speaking from personal experience, to shine some light on his character and personality in different stages of his prolific life.

I started my first employment at the Institute of Landscape Biology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (further ILB SaS) directed by M. Ružička in September 1978 right after finishing my university studies. My mind was preoccupied by other thoughts and experiences from the recent holidays. I came to my first work meeting at my first job led by the director of the entire institute approximately one hour late. Thus, I managed to shock and surprise Milan immediately with my views of work ethics, supervision, social norms. When asked why I was so late I bravely uttered that I thought a big boss like him would probably not bother to come to work earlier than 10 a.m. He did not find that very funny, others were truthfully stupefied since they knew how wrong I was. Milan Ružička namely kept to deadlines more diligently than most of us. However, maybe he could appreciate my total honesty because consequently he aimed his energy more at my potential contribution to the then forming biological landscape planning than at my lack of propriety.

Our Department of Ecological Syntheses was small at that time, also there was an age gap of 15–20 years between M. Ružička and other young scientists. Interestingly, our boss obviously enjoyed teaching and raising us when it came to anything like the colour choices to use in maps, instructional talks on driving the departmental Moskvitch car, test tasting of his self-made spirits with pretty names like slivovica, kalvados, belovica, and to top it all, oskorošovica (plum and yellow plum spirits, calvados, chequers distilled from *Sorbus domestica*). He used to treat us with these products when at his cottage in Podolie – before, during or after the terrain works – and when we succumbed, I think both parties were satisfied, despite the miserable states of our stomachs and heads. There is a saying by the tragically deceased Milan Kapusta that still lingers in our midst: “Boss, do not treat us to chequers, we promise to behave”. Milan was a master in slow-grilling of chickens on embers: on hand-picked, chopped and tied twigs, preparing and seasoning the chickens, sectioning



and offering them with his own hands, not forgetting to accompany all of this with his own musical production by playing the shepherd's pipe, dressed in his national costume.

That was him at the time and that was how the “Ružičkovci” team formed in the middle of the seventies. And this cluster – Ružička and Ružičkovci – was ever active, lively, pulsing with energy and was able to persevere even when his own activity ceased. I am sure this is what M. Ružička wanted it to become as well – as one of the most dominant representatives of collective, integrated scientific work and social relations – right up to the time when he left.

The following years could only be described as a frontal attack of Ružička and Ružičkovci on scientific laurels. Under his guidance a methodology of ecological landscape planning called LANDEP appeared on the scientific market and was received with success at home and abroad, especially in the context of the scientific co-operation of RVHP-Comecon countries. Of course, success is sometimes “punished” by a certain form of envy and jealousy at home and M. Ružička had to pull all the stops to balance this pressure. There could be some truth in saying that we

overdid it at times – people knew that if Ružička and Ružičkovci attended a conference, they made sure to flood it with maps, new ideas, procedures and methodology. Our leader wanted to hone our skill-set in those interactions, to teach us how to lead an argument and stand our ground. Even though it was difficult from time to time, we all were too enthusiastic to give up. The practical call for his work, the high demand for consultations and co-operation with him kept us going.

The organisational character of our workplace underwent a storm of changes, when ILB SaS ceased to exist, the Institute of Experimental Biology and Ecology, and later Centrum of Biological Ecological Sciences-Institute of Experimental Biology and Ecology emerged, and finally after the Velvet Revolution it formed into Institute of Landscape Ecology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The position of Ružička changed as well, first he was a director, then a section leader, director of department again. His enthusiasm and talent for applied landscape ecology and his leadership skills did not falter or break.

He continued to develop, organize, maintain, re-establish... all of those things are really data for statistics and chronicles. However, it is certainly necessary to accentuate his strength in persuading his collective of the necessity of teamwork for the evolution of the science and individual professional growth, something which was not to be taken for granted in those times and could even hamper the career of some individuals. Even the biggest events of Ružička and Ružičkovci were always seen as a team effort – the ecological planning of Považská Bystrica, Rimavská Sobota, Horná Nitra and another dozens of similar ones. Maybe the biggest event of his team and of our landscape ecologists as such (more than 35 participants) was the ecological evaluation of the Eastern Slovakian lowlands, resulting in two symposiums in Zemplínska Šírava led by him. His team consisted of researchers from Bratislava, Banská Štiavnica, Košice, Michalovce, etc... The dams of the east-Slovak rivers were being driven upon by our terrain vehicles with their flagship in the lead – the yellow Skoda of M. Ružička – for many seasons so that we could later have infinite discussions (in the hotel Jalta in Michalovce, camping park in Veľatý or at the excellent restaurant in Streda nad Bodrogom) about the micro-depressions of the Eastern Slovak lowlands, about the vineyards in Tarbucka, the wild animals in the barrier midlands, where he liked to go hunting..

The end of the seventies and the eighties of the previous century mark the most worthy scientific results of Ružička and Ružičkovci for the LANDEP methodology. It was a ripening age for his group, yet it allowed to sprout new branches in new tasks – general ecological development plan of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Central Slovakia region and counties, the bief Hrušov, as well as many assignments in co-operation with the Agricultural Project Institute, the main urbanistic institute in Slovakia named URBION, the Institute of General Architect of Bratislava and mainly with the ecological studio of the urban project institute named Stavoprojekt in Žilina and Banská Bystrica, all of course, under the methodical supervision of Milan. The latter collaboration with Stavoprojekt is considered the most massive systemically organized co-operation of experienced landscape ecologists comparable with similar works abroad.

Another chapter in the “world history” books seem to be his symposiums, taking place every three years since 1967 until today. Besides M. Ružička’s perfect organisation (with our enthusiastic help from panel installation to lectures, from playing in

his music band in national costumes to inviting foreign guests to our own homes for dinners, or simply cleaning the lecture halls) these events confirmed again and again both his professional and personal aptitude as well as the quality of the Slovak ecological landscaping movement. Besides many scientific successes from other symposiums, the one from 1982 in Piešťany is worth mentioning specifically because it was the place of establishment of the international association of landscape ecologists IALE, a lion’s share of credit for which can be assigned to M. Ružička.

New tasks, assignments and concepts gradually arose, and some of the fruit ripened too much... We found out that Bratislava was too small for all of us and we needed to move to Nitra as well. Only due to his unquenched esprit such relocation to Nitra was made possible. He was building something up again. Ružička and Ružičkovci (with fresh blood and substantially enriched by the young generation) were rolling up their sleeves again. Experiences overflowed, followed by the need to share, teach others. It was also Milan’s initiative that he, together with his co-workers, populated the halls of universities – in Nitra, Bratislava, Zvolen, Košice, Prešov, Banská Bystrica. M. Ružička himself vividly participated in the establishment of the Faculty of Ecology at Technical University in Zvolen.

The time was ripe for a change, the Velvet Revolution came and Ružička and Ružičkovci sometimes found themselves deeply involved in it. The next chapter therefore seems a bit political, though he and many of us did not want to get entangled in it per se. This is the place where I need to say that it was not the politicians who sucked us in but our topic of work, our job content. It formed a background that almost forced us to participate.

In the last two decades before November 1989 the state of the environment in some Czechoslovak regions deteriorated to such a critical point that it required action on the side of the Communist leadership of the state which was taking quite a vehement approach considering the period. Science and research of the area – including our department – were supported, welcoming new methodology and projects, publishing material. There were, of course, works created in dissent like the State of the environment in Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (“*Stav životního prostředí v ČSSR* report”) – with our institution’s contribution – or a report named Bratislava aloud (“*Bratislava nahlas*”) – where we were asked to publish a review. All of those factors resulted in bringing environmental issues into the spotlight of the Velvet Revolution and we were part of that process. Our scientific “politics” was obviously different from the approach of the typical eco-activists before, as well as after the change. Our focus was to optimise the organisation of the space, bring offensive solutions, let science have a chair at the table for planning – it basically kept us at the pulse of the new state politics.

Even though the revolution left significant traces in the activities and organisational structures of our department, the professionalism of Ružička and Ružičkovci kept us in the mainstream and moreover, grew in importance. We were able to reflect our professional opinions in political terminology, show the necessity to align economical activities of people with environmental strategies in the largest scale possible.

I can say with certainty that there was already a sustainability development program existing at that time despite us not coming up with such a catchy name for the trend it became in the future. M. Ružička was appointed the counsellor of the then first Minister of Environment, other colleagues were politically ac-

tive as well, our professional team entered the official politics of the Slovak republic, while LANDEP became part of AGENDA 21 as a methodology of integrated landscape management. Both LANDEP and the methodology of the territorial systems of ecological stability, born in the Ružičkovci group, was included in the legislature of the Slovak Republic.

Ružičkovci evolved, creating many branches with new faces and new ideas. Ružička and his original group shifted into the roles of teachers and mentors and they actively shared their knowledge at various universities. There were tens of professors, assistant lecturers and academic personages whose work carried the direct or indirect signs of being influenced by the ecological landscaping theories of the Ružička school. They later educated and shaped another generations in order to carry the torch he lit long time ago.

Time wounds all heels as they say, it doesn't seem to flow but fly sometimes and naturally, M. Ružička gradually needed more time to rest and slow down in his activities together with his colleagues in retirement.

A personal memory to share on the fleeting quality of time: When M. Ružička celebrated his 80th jubilee in Nitra, I congratulated him and said I wish he could drive his car himself to shake my hand when I am 80, too. He was surprised at first, then he understood and we shared a laugh over it, albeit with our eyes suspiciously wet. Sadly, my wish did not come true, it fell five years short.

How to conclude, what to say? I would like to stress two crucial aspects that do not necessarily reflect on the specific works of M. Ružička but rather speak volumes about his personality and authentic approach to science and life. The first one is professional: in spite of the younger generation probably not realizing this, the ideas he set up in the seventies about the place and tasks of the landscape ecology for the development of our society, as well as the elementary traits of transferring those ideas into reality, have not changed substantially or been replaced. New generations, do not fight them, develop them! The second aspect grasps his personality and character. I am convinced that such a man who could integrate personal ambitions of a number of young people (long-term, without manipulation) into a good team with common effort, collective projects and publishing, would be hard if not impossible to find in our modern, heavily polarized world.

Milan, you can look back at your life work with pride. And we all are beyond thankful for everything you left us.

With respect and precious memories
László Miklós