

Bohdan Slavík

80th anniversary of birthday



Bohdan and his wife Jiřina

*RNDr. Bohdan Slavík DrSc., co-founder of *Biologia Plantarum* and its first Executive Editor, celebrates his 80th birthday on 30 October of this year. This anniversary provides a broader context for recalling Bohdan as a scientific personality who has made a profound impression on the post-war development and direction of plant physiology. As with other branches of science in the 1950s, this science developed in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand there was the broad base of institutions of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, then being established and far exceeding pre-war scope of investment in science, on the other hand, there was a fledgling generation without any experience, without a specialized background, foreign relations and an adequate methodical preparation. The political situation created a remote parallel of Robinson Crusoe whose island in this case was not isolated by an ocean but by an emerging totalitarian regime. The progress of science under conditions limiting its fundamental postulates – international connections, and any exchange of information and experience. Bohdan Slavík belonged to those scientific personalities who made a determined attempt to correct this impasse. It was his initiative and endeavour which in 1959 gave rise to *Biologia Plantarum* to which Professor Bohumil Němec, the Nestor of Czech physiology, offered his reputation and scientific authority and for which Academician Ivan Málek obtained political blessing (indeed, even a scientific journal was a political subject at that time).*

In those days such a journal represented for the domestic environment far more than merely a further international publication of biological literature. More often than not it was a gateway through which scientific novices entered to throw their hat into the ring. But it was also a signal telling the international scientific public that active scientific institutions were emerging in Czechoslovakia. Last but not least, it was an irreplaceable medium for international contacts. Thanks to Bohdan's efforts, strict editorial standards were introduced from the very beginning so that the international ambitions accompanying its birth, could be realized. Awareness of vitally essential contacts with the rest of the world prompted Bohdan Slavík to organize the first international symposium in 1965, entitled "Water Stress in Plants". This was in line with the simple yet effective more general strategy of the semi-permeable border which in effect prevented domestic scholars from travelling abroad but was more generous in welcoming their foreign colleagues. One of the windows to the international scientific world was also the International Biological Programme in which Bohdan Slavík participated actively, popularising its ideas in his own country. Bohdan was engaged in pioneering activities jointly with Ivan Šetlík in building a domestic methodical foundation. Today it is something that is taken for granted, but in those days it was a technical, economic and information problem. Bohdan Slavík grappled successfully with this problem in all its shapes and forms. Using original methods he enriched the methodological study of the water regime and the uptake of photosynthetic carbon dioxide; he used his inventiveness and zeal to improvise, in the good tradition of national do-it-yourself methods, equipment that was not accessible on the domestic market owing to a shortage of foreign currency. But what

was even more important, he was one of the first to publish a methodical monograph (Slavík, B.: *Metody Studia Vodního Provozu Rostlin*, Academia, Prague 1965), which in an enlarged and revised form came out as *Methods of Studying Plant Water Relations* which became a publication in the Springer-Verlag list in 1974. He was one of the initiators and co-editors of the publication in book form of methodical monographs (*Methodical Handbooks in Experimental Botany*), published by the Academia publishing house. Indeed, Bohdan Slavík has undoubtedly been involved in the activities of the entire professional community, and it is now time to focus on his personal biographical data and professional career.

Bohdan was born on October 30 1924 in Hradec Kralové, a historical town in Northeast Bohemia as the only son of a family of secondary teachers. He started his university education in 1945 at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Charles University in Prague. He married Jiřina Veselá in 1949. This was a marriage of two professionally close people that continues till this day (Jiřina later became associate professor of the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Charles University). Bohdan graduated as an RNDr in plant physiology and anatomy in 1950 when he became a post-graduate student at the newly founded Biological Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. In 1950-1953 he prepared his thesis entitled "The Dynamics of Water Deficit in Plants". In 1954, after having obtained his PhD degree in Plant Physiology, he founded the Laboratory of Water Relations. In 1967 he defended his science doctorate dissertation at the Institute of Experimental Botany of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, and later became head of the Department of Water Relations and Photosynthesis. His personal scientific focus has been on the study of plant water relations mainly with regard to the biophysical mechanisms and ecophysiological cause of the development of plant water deficit and its influence on the photosynthetic CO₂ uptake. His prolific work has included 75 original papers and his authorship and co-authorship of 11 books. If to this skeleton of his scientific career we were to add data on study trips abroad, on his pedagogical activities, on his membership in editorial boards, scientific councils of the Czech Academy of Sciences and universities, on his activities in charge of coordination bodies of basic research etc., the charismatic scientific and human personality of Bohdan Slavík and his generally acknowledged attributes would be buried under the multitude of all these posts, activities and awards.

I listened to his inauguration report at this year's 10th Czech-Slovak days on plant physiology in Bratislava in which he summed up the domestic history of this branch of science since 1945. He was a raconteur as well as a speaker who succeeded in holding the attention and concentration of an audience of various ages from his welcoming greetings to his final words of recognition. To a number of occasional meetings at the conference he brought intellectual curiosity, an inquiring turn of mind and debating skill. With proverbial eagerness he did his utmost to master a wide spectrum of subjects from the organization of science in Slovakia, to the presence of bears in that country, to American elections or the role of religion in a globalised world. He provided an authentic demonstration that a person celebrating his 80th anniversary remains true to his image, an image that is so clear that when addressing him on this anniversary one does not have to refer to his mental alertness. Bohdan, the doyen of Czech plant physiologists, has a number of qualities that in this rapidly galloping world of today's culture unfortunately belong in the red book of qualities that are dying out. He is socially urbane with a tendency towards self-irony and a huge sense of humour. Here it should be mentioned that many unbearable meetings became bearable thanks to Bohdan's presence. He moreover is a rare specimen of natural scientist with an encyclopaedic treasure of knowledge. He is capable of naming and defining many other species apart from *Arabidopsis thaliana* (I have seen this for myself on various botanical excursions). This knowledge is astonishingly and positively correlated with the use of mathematics and physics in a closer personal specialization.

Finally our congratulations. There is a host of well wishers: the editorial board, his domestic community of plant physiologists, his colleagues abroad. In the first place our gratitude for all you have done for the general good of our profession and of all who appreciate it. Our best wishes are quite simple: you will make us happy if you remain the way you are for as long time to come, in addition to good health and contentedness.

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