



Jiří Velemínský

Member of Editorial Board

1933 - 2008

RNDr. Jiří Velemínský, DrSc, a member of the Editorial Board of *Biologia Plantarum*, sadly died on the 23rd February 2008. Rightly considered to be the founder of modern Czech plant genetics, he was an outstanding scientist who was highly respected both in the Czech Republic and in international circles alike. He will be greatly missed.

Jiří Velemínský started his scientific career in 1957 after graduating in genetics from the Faculty of Biology, Charles University in Prague. He achieved the title CSc (PhD) whilst at the Institute of Experimental Botany of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (later Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic), where he spent most of his working life. He was among the lucky few who managed to take advantage of the relative political thaw of the nineteen sixties when, as a young PhD student, he was given permission to visit and gain experience at a number of prestigious institutions in Western Europe. Among these was the University of Göttingen, where he spent a year (1964-65) working under the tuition of Prof. G. Röbbelen. He took full advantage of this opportunity (at the time exceptional) to widen his experience. As well as enabling him to learn new methodological approaches, it had a strong influence in shaping his future scientific direction and career.

Around the time of Jiří Velemínský's visits to the West, considerable attention was being focussed on DNA, the structure of which had been published only a decade earlier. Damage to, and repair of, DNA following exposure to radiation or to chemical agents was one of the "hot topics" of the sixties, leading in turn to intensive research into cell and molecular biology. Much of the work concentrated on oncologically interesting problems, with plant research as usual taking a back seat. Nevertheless Jiří Velemínský persevered and was among the first to demonstrate that plants too possessed mechanisms for the repair of DNA damage, which led in turn to the recovery of chromosomal aberrations and mutations. He identified DNA repair enzymes in plants and studied their activation by mutagenic agents. His team also demonstrated for the first time that plants are capable of enzymatically converting non-mutagenic promutagens into agents with mutagenic activity often entering into the food chain.

In his later years Jiří Velemínský worked with the *ada* repair gene from *Escherichia coli* and succeeded in transforming tobacco plants and tissue cultures with the gene. This work allowed him to demonstrate that the expression of the *ada* gene increased in the presence of mutagenic agents. It was also largely thanks to his efforts that the plant *Arabidopsis thaliana* – a humble weed – became the universal model for plant genetic and plant molecular

biology research. The youthful face of Jiří Velemínský can be seen on the group photograph taken at the first symposium of Arabidopsis research held in Göttingen in 1965. From these early beginnings he was a member of the Editorial Board of the Arabidopsis Information Service periodical, which helped to build the reputation of that now universal model.

His discoveries rightly secured for him a deserved illustrious place in the historical development of plant genetics. His contribution to Czech research in cellular and molecular plant genetics, which in the past had lagged behind, was quite notable and essential.

It does not often happen that a talented scientist also proves to be an able administrator, particularly one capable of rendering valuable service to the community of professional scientists at large and able to foster the well being of an academic institution. Jiří Velemínský proved to be a very able administrator and achieved both. The early nineties were critical times for the former Academy of Sciences, during which it lost its autocratic position and became transformed into an open system of Institutes of equal status. Dr. Jiří Velemínský was instrumental in leading this change. Later he was appointed Deputy Chairman of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, with responsibility for its chemical and biological sections (1993-1997), and twice in succession he was elected Director of the Institute of Experimental Botany ASCR (1990-1998). He proved to be an able and hard working organizer and administrator, showing responsibility and common sense. His friends and colleagues recognized and respected his moral qualities, his honesty and his sense of justice. He was a good listener, with a sympathetic ear for people's problems, for which he was often able to find an acceptable solution. Often he was called on to act as an independent arbiter when a personal or institutional solution was needed.

Jiří Velemínský was a brave man who did not allow his serious illness to affect his personal dignity. From his own department to the highest echelons of Academy of Sciences he was known as "a man without enemies". It is fitting that a few months before his death he was awarded the medal "De Scientia et Humanitate Optime Meritis", the highest honour the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic can bestow. I know of no one in the academic world who more justly deserved this honour than Jiří Velemínský.

J. Krekule