

Zlatko Kvaček

our teacher and colleague

I am one of the palaeobotanists who was fortunate in getting acquainted with Prof. Zlatko Kvaček at the beginning of my career. Thus, during the 1970s, I had the pleasant opportunity to learn in one of the best palaeobotanical workshops of Europe of that time, in Prague, from the researcher who was in possession of vast amount of knowledge and professional experience and already at the top of his scientific activities.

In Hungary, palaeobotanical research was interrupted after the death of Gábor Andreánszky. Some of his former students made some field trips and collected fossil material, however, due to other activities and limited alternatives no more opportunities presented themselves at the end of the seventies. Anyone who has already tried to enhance his or her scientific knowledge without the guidance of a mentor or supervisor knows, that learning fragments of information that might take weeks or months of hard work, can be substituted with a few sentences of advice from an experienced and thoughtful mentor. At that time Zlatko Kvaček was already an excellent researcher with great professional experience and was a very good teacher, even though, he did not work at the university at that time when he was employed at the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences. He helped in a creative way – he was able to motivate and arouse our interest in a new topic or a new method and showed new research lines. His knowledge of his field of research is remarkably thorough and comprehensive in space and time enabling him to study fossil floras and floristic relations of the neighbouring countries; moreover, he is devoted to this work.

In spite of the difficulties raised by the relatively closed borders of that time, he built up numerous international cooperations and travelled extensively; moreover he visited all the important European collections and accomplished a heroic work. To study even more fossil material he worked untiringly from early morning, often till late at night. He has been working with undiminished energy and a great love of research and expanded his travels after the opening of the borders beyond the boundaries of Central Europe and entered also the American continent where he works a lot even nowadays.

His excellent memory is the most impressive for me in from his talent for research. He is able to memorize most of the fossil specimens – he remembers which one in which collection he saw or even where he saw similar fossil remains. He remembers and can diagram the cuticular structure of taxa once studied. Even the nearly unpronounceable names of localities in various countries are not exceptions; he can recall these names, their age and even their floral lists. Although his university degree is in geology, he has developed a broad perception of the botanical and ecological attributes of floras and taxa. He has always been emphasizing the importance of real botanical affinities of fossil plants, their systematic relations in the evaluations of fossil floras. Even today he is willing to accommodate new research methods or themes, though most people in his age and stature would not endeavour to this. His accuracy in all scientific problems is exemplary. He can easily differentiate which is a really important research task and which is merely „fashion”. It is unequivocal for him to stand by real scientific values and to carry out research according to these values.

Being an excellent researcher alone is not enough to make a good teacher or mentor. Feeling obliged to give our knowledge to someone else is essential. A genuine teacher is devoid of jealousy and egotism in his field of research. Zlatko Kvaček is not only an excellent teacher but a good colleague and friend. He offers his help to the younger generation not in a patronizing manner but as a cooperating colleague. The explanation for it that he is in possession of

outstanding attributes; he is devoid of pride and presumption. He approaches everybody with impartiality, his nice manner inspires confidence but he also has confidence in colleagues.

Dear Zlatko, I am lucky and proud to study under your guidance and to be your colleague and friend for decades! I wish you would be with your great knowledge and creative instinct with us for a long time!

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Arriving in Prague at the central train station, I met Zlatko for the first time in 1980. At that time I was a student already preparing my PhD, and it was my first visit beyond the screen of the iron curtain. It was a rather grey day in early autumn. We went to the address of the former lab in Spalena 49. Opposite from this address, Zlatko pointed up to a rather milky shining window explaining that this is the lab. We went upstairs and I settled in to spend one month learning the technique of preparing fossil cuticles. Even from inside, the window looked milky, and obviously the reason was not the foggy and grey weather outside. Zlatko recognized my scrutiny and explained that the glass had been frosted by hydrofluoric acid, which he used to put in between the double-glass window by default of a fume cupboard. This was my very first impression in Prague.

From that time onwards Zlatko offered me every chance for scientific discussion and for the study of fossil and modern leaf material as well as to take advantage of his library. Countless reciprocal visits by Zlatko in Vienna and now Stuttgart and by me in Prague followed as the result of our intensive cooperation. Zlatko combines geological and botanical knowledge, which is an exceptionally rare but essential skill to decipher former plant life. Whenever questions arise Zlatko finds the time to answer. Prior to his retirement this was also the case when Zlatko was still overburdened by administrative duties. Guests hardly could ever feel that Zlatko's brain had to find solutions for tricky situations at the institute while, at the same time, he was trying to deal with a palaeobotanical issue.

Whenever we meet, we are working from morning to evening. But Zlatko is also fond of a short coffee break at the right time and a beer or glass of wine in the evening. The possibility to spend 10 or 12 hours or even more a day for palaeobotany certainly is also related to the great and warm hospitality of his home, of Zlatko and his wife Hanka; Hanka is Zlatko's wonderful and discreet manager. Zlatko is a never resting locomotive for palaeobotany because his hobby remains his lifetime profession and passion. We thank you, Zlatko, for your many years of continuing friendly guidance, collaboration, and for setting a high standard in palaeobotanical research. We wish you, Zlatko, to continue as long as you have fun.

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I remember when I met Zlatko in Bilina during our first common field trip in 1995. We were walking together and suddenly he spoke to me about the possibility to start my Master degree studies in palaeobotany under his supervision. I was impressed and surprised, because I had still not decided whether I would study fossil animals or other palaeontological matter but I said yes to him. And I still do not regret it!

Zlatko, or rather 'Mr Professor' how we call him usually in Czech, attracts his students by a seductive combination of dutiful teacher and top scientist. In fact, he is a perfect example of academic who can directly transfer his scientific results into the teaching. His broad experiences and knowledge of the literature and interconnections among researchers internationally provide the substance of excellent advice and trustworthy lectures. I must openly say that it was sometimes hard for me to keep up. I remember when I was alone in his class in angiosperm phylogeny. He continued to teach me even though the University policy allows that classes with

low enrollment may be cancelled. Typically each of our sessions would continue non-stop for three hours. I wrote all my papers and was completely worn out at the end; yet he was fresh, still ready to continue! This is him. When you come to consult him with any problem, he always stops his work and helps you. I also appreciate his generosity and openness toward young people. Zlatko introduced me to the paleobotanical community when I started as a greenhorn under his protection to participate to international conferences. Today, if I need to go to Paris for a scientific consultation, he never hesitates to support me with the grant money although he could buy a new digital camera for his research program. He promotes young scientists. And we want to emulate him. It is surely not by chance that all of his students have found successful jobs in palaeobotany. I think that Jirka, Pepík, Pedro, Vasil, Jiřinka, Milan and I – we are all conscious of it.

In my mind, Zlatko is a locomotive which goes very very fast. If you want to board the train, it does not slow down. But there is always a welcoming hand to help you aboard – if you can keep up. I wish to Zlatko a lot of steam for the next ride, for the rest of us I wish that we all still have enough energy to keep up with him!

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