



**Jiří MÁLEK, *Věda a jiné lásky [Science and Other Loves]*,
University of Pardubice 2020, 235 pp., ISBN 978-80-7560-307-4.**

In the preface to a memoir of the prominent Czech chemist Jiří Málek, the historian Milena Lenderová characterized him as a person with a “Renaissance intellectual and cultural scope”, as an expert on history, art history, literature, philosophy and music. This wide range of interests in the humanities of the long-time rector of the University of Pardubice that led another historian to write the present review.

The book, which was created as a reflection of a lifetime of sixty years, takes a different form than ordinary memoir literature. Its first half is occupied by a thematically structured interview with the art historian Pavel Panoch, entitled “About lifetime loves, houses and people”, almost all of the second half consists of chronologically conceived memories of “Journeys for Science”. Finally, there is a documentary part – a bibliography of scientific works by Jiří Málek, brief medallions of his doctoral students and selected speeches from years 2005–2020. All this is accompanied by many reproduced photographs from private life, pedagogical and scientific work of Jiří Málek, and of course also from his social contacts and foreign travels.

The two main parts of the memoir – the composed interview and the scientific autobiography – in fact overlap in their particulars. This is inevitable, as each of these dedicated sections has a slightly different purpose and will quite possibly have a different circle of readers. The second part, which brings – in addition to the biographical overview – a lot of specific data from the field of chemistry and assortment of natural sciences, this will be fully appreciated especially by those interested in the development of chemical sciences and related disciplines in the past half century. On the other hand, the first part of the book has a large interdisciplinary overlap and attracts not only specialists in the sciences and humanities, but also lovers of biographical and travel literature.

The author presented his storytelling skills in chapters that form detailed answers to questions from Associate Professor Panoch. This is evident already at the beginning – when depicting the childhood landscape under Svojanov Castle in Eastern Bohemia and the way of life in a rustic environment, which has not yet been much affected by the violent socialization of the countryside. Professor Málek applies a specific style of narration. He speaks of his extended family (including three generations of ancestors) by placing it in the context of the history of everyday life and creating a medallion of life in the 20th century. The family’s experience of the period of “normalization” during the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, when society was newly differentiated under

the pressure of the communist dictatorship, again affects a politically distorted society of people affected by repression, people just surviving without active participation and informants in service of the regime.

The personal thread of Málek's narrative determines firstly the relationship to a future lifelong profession: an inclination to scientific interests – from observing small innovations in farming to the deep impression of a ten-year-old boy from the television broadcast on 21 July 1969, when American astronauts landed on the Moon. That was also the first time he became acquainted with chemistry and literature in this field and he set up a miniature laboratory at home. In addition to chemistry, the study years were also accompanied by an interest in photography, modern music, literature, and art. In times of socialism, the “Czech travel desire”, characteristic for the inhabitants of a country gripped by mountains in the middle of the European continent, could only be fulfilled by modest trips to the countries of the Eastern bloc, exceptionally to Austria.

The gates to the world did not open until 1989. Málek's study internships and the establishment of international scientific relations led in many directions, but the defining destinations became the University of Seville and the National Institute of Materials Science in Tsukuba, Japan. There he could fully appreciate the importance of foreign inspirations, not only in learning about new research methods and results, but also in the approach to science and the life mission of researchers. In constantly comparing the lives and activities of scientists in Europe, Asia and America, Jiří Málek formulated his scientific goals and focused his own experimental research. He went beyond the general issues of science, higher education and university research, whose clear formulation echoes in the memoir: “higher education and doctoral studies in particular mainly represent training in overcoming obstacles that fate poses for us” (p. 41) and “the personality of the tutor is extremely important here, perhaps even more important than the topic itself ” (p. 40).

These are not theoretical proclamations, but a reflection of life experience. Jiří Málek recognized the consequences of socialist seclusion, the historical “timelessness” which he captured through the eyes of a student and a young scientist. However, he also captured the other side of this unfortunate situation: politically conditioned constraints were compensated not only by student jokes, but also by enhanced efforts to achieve solid results despite the unfavorable circumstances. From here springs Málek's critique of some aspects of the development of science in the liberated environment, which is manifested by volatile spread of attention over the surface, a persistent effort for originality and for fast publication. “Even in my own field, in past years I have observed greater fragmentation, shattered focus and too little fundament” (p. 43).

Since 2000, Jiří Málek has repeatedly worked in the management of the University of Pardubice as a vice-rector or rector. He is well aware of the difficulties brought by a combination of a full commitment to research with the burden of top management. Here, too, he makes a generalization of the experience gained – he understands the university as a “very fine mechanism”, in which the key managerial method is reaching a consensus and the goal is not only the coexistence of different disciplines, but also the intertwining in their diversity (p. 53). Málek's thinking about the university is characterized by a sense for the complexity of knowledge and cultivation in the broadest sense – as a representative of a relatively young university, he insists on intertwining and mutual educational complementarity of natural sciences, technical

fields, social disciplines and humanities. He appreciates the relationship between the city and the local university, which, on the other hand, is a very important complement to the city's cultural integrity. It acts as a strong supporter of the decentralization of higher education, which even in a smaller country such as the Czech Republic (about ten million inhabitants) cannot be limited to one or two traditional centres, but must be spread to important regions: "The quality of every city, every civil society, depends on the number of educated, ideologically unencumbered people with critical thinking and social empathy" (p. 56).

Theoretically, but also through practical negotiations, Rector Málek entered into an endless and always thankless process of evaluating science and its institutional financing, namely in the Government Council for Development, Research and Innovation. The book explains the difficulty to express and properly evaluate quality in science in a myriad of diverse aspects, and it shows that, in elaboration of the evaluation criteria, a major role was played by the discussions that have repeatedly taken place in the Learned Society of the Comenius Academic Club, starting by its annual meeting in New York in 2013.

Jiří Málek also comments on broader topics, which in an interview with Pavel Panoch managed to be clearly structured into several areas. Of general importance is the naturalist's reflection on the relationship between science and religion. Málek is a supporter of reconciliation between the two spheres of reasoning, as he is aware of both the limits of human intellectual abilities and the always imperfect level of knowledge, as well as the need for "inner perception of spirituality" (p. 65). It is in the constant effort of the scientist for better knowledge that he manifests himself as a follower of the ideas of Karl Popper. He also reflects his concept of constantly striving for better knowledge in the concept of teaching: a real (university) teacher is not primarily a mediator of specific knowledge, but a person who explains the context and with his own example wakes interest for the studied discipline.

With his pedagogical thinking, Jiří Málek follows in the footsteps of J.A. Comenius. His concept of the highest level of education hearkens back to Comenius with the emphasis on the study of foreign languages and on foreign studies, as evidenced by his own experience from Spain and Japan. It is remarkable how intense experience he gained from the countries in which he stayed for a long time, especially in the field of history and art, but also religion. This is manifested, for example, when comparing the overall character of large cultures, because in the two countries closest to him, Jiří Málek found cultural antipodes – Spanish openness to external influences and the Japanese effort to accept foreign stimuli to such an extent that they can be integrated into domestic tradition. It is interesting that the legal theorist Michal Tomášek has recently reached the same conclusion in his comparative research on European and Far Eastern law.

Málek's views of the landscape, which he compares in the Spanish-Japanese-Czech triangle, are very impressive in terms of literature. It is clear from them that these countries were not visited by an ordinary tourist, but by a person equipped with scientific knowledge and also a strong sensitivity both to the beauty of nature and to human creations. Another level of Málek's interpretation are socio-psychological musings, again mainly about Japan and the Japanese, and an attempt to capture their

differences from the Europeans, especially the paradoxical contradiction between their social organization and individual loneliness.

The broad cultural background of the author's reflections is complemented by the place in which Jiří Málek and his family created a permanent residence. It is the historical centre of the city of Pardubice and a Renaissance house, documented in archive records since 1526, which he bought in 2000. The relationship to this place does not reflect simple local patriotism, but a purposeful search for historical roots and interconnectedness of cultures, especially the Czech, Central European and Spanish culture.

The memoir of Professor Jiří Málek is not the usual anniversary publication, of which many are published. It is a scientific and also a generally humanistic portrait of a rector representing one of the young Czech universities, a man whose work and outlook goes beyond his profession as a researcher in the field of chemistry. Jiří Málek spent his first sixty years at the turn of the eras – the first half during communist totalitarianism, the second after the onset of liberal capitalism. He understood both epochs and spontaneously mastered the cultural-historical view of the world and its development. His many talents, language skills and persistent diligence enabled him to get intimately acquainted with a large part of our planet, but above all two of the great cultural centres. He brought a special testimony about it in words and pictures. It is a deep look at the cultural roots and presence of southwestern Europe and the islands of Far East Asia, but also at Czechia, the author's homeland, a small country that lies on the axis between the West and the East. The book by Jiří Málek, a scientist, traveller, photographer, and thinker, is a contribution to the understanding of contemporary Europeanism and rational world citizenship.

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