

## Ota Oliva – an ichthyologist on the wrong side

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On 29 December 1994 Ota Oliva died of exhaustion. Some weeks earlier he survived surgery for cancer of the intestine but his weak constitution failed to combat pneumonia caught following that operation. And so ended the tormented life of one of the most talented ichthyologists on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, professor at Charles University in Prague, now the Czech Republic. We three authors are by chance each about four years younger of each other (1930, 1934, 1939) and so form an equally spaced graduating sequence at Charles University initiated by Ota Oliva who was born on 8 December 1926. This sequence continued for some time to produce one of the largest number of ichthyologists per capita of any country in the world.

Encouraged to study fishes by Ota Oliva, we subsequently became his collaborators, friends and confidants in various orders and at various times. Later we learned to use these ties to counter the pressures of communist reality. If not dissidents, we were at least regarded as those to be watched, and so we concentrated on fishes instead of politics. 'Otík', as we all learned to call him in friendly diminutive, was the initial leader. Sometime later he started to call himself 'staříčkový učitel', the ancient sensei!

Ota Oliva's interest in fishes began when very young. Raised by his father Otto Oliva from the age of four, Otík did not meet his mother until he was 40 years old. He never married. Already as a child he was passionately interested in animals and one winter day a half frozen wasp he rescued became the subject of his first publication [Oliva, O. 1934. *Moje vosy* (My wasp). *Vesmír* 13: 131]. At that time he was

attending the second grade of elementary school. His historian father and language teacher uncle were too embarrassed to even correct his next contribution [Oliva, O. 1935. *Moje rosníčka* (My green tree frog). *Vesmír* 14: 85]. His interest in animals was hence linked to a desire for communicating about them. Soon Otík became an active tropical fish hobbyist and became a fixture with the owners and shoppers of various pet shops in his native Prague. In 1942 his lifelong interest in cichlid fishes was initiated during such casual browsing and he became, at sixteen, a member of the Prague aquarium and terrarium society.

Through this society's activities Otík soon met his most influential sponsor, Dr. Oldřich V. Hykeš, then professor at the school of Veterinary Medicine in Brno and the editor of the successful magazine 'Akvaristické listy' (Folia Aquaristica). When seventeen Otík published in this magazine [Oliva, O. 1943. *Geophagus gymnogenys* Hensel. *Akvaristické listy* 17: 17–18] his first paper as an adult. Hykeš advised the young fish enthusiast not to enroll in veterinary medicine but in zoology and to specialize in the study of fishes (Fig. 1). And so Otík followed Jaroslav Hrbáček, another acquaintance from the aquarium society, to study at the Faculty of Natural Science, Charles University in Prague. Here, at Viničná 7 (Fig. 2), Otík remained working for the rest of his life.

In the meantime Hykeš moved to the newly established Faculty of Education in Prague and Otík was asked to collaborate as his research assistant even before the completion of his degree in 1950. As a recent recipient of the diploma *Rerum*



Fig. 1. Ota Oliva at graduation from gymnasium (high school) on 4 June 1946.

Naturalium Doctor (RNDR) Otík started his life-long position at the Institute of Zoology and later the Department of Systematic Zoology thanks to the recognition received during his undergraduate studies by such prominent professors as Julius Komárek, Otto Jírovec and another early rising star Jaroslav Hrbáček. In spite of indisputable merits, his climb up the academic ladder was tortuous at best – he was never accepted by the wave of opportunists eager to join the inhumane practices of the Communist Party. In short, Otík was denied a much-deserved full professorship until the demise of communism in 1989.

Ota Oliva was a humanist, altruist and philanthropist. Personally always merry, polite and candid, he hated injustice, lies, falsehood, duplicity, amorality – and bureaucracy. Often making fun of himself (e.g. Fig. 3) he was also ready to criticize, mostly by sarcastic remarks. Due to this eloquence and sharp tongue, Otík became feared and sometimes hated by many who outranked him through party allegiances but were far below him in scientific, teaching and organizational accomplishments.

After his early interest also in herpetology, Otík began to concentrate on the study of lampreys and fishes, and became the first full-time ichthyologist in Czechoslovakia. His studies were devoted to the distribution and taxonomy of local fishes, and also Bulgarian and Macedonian fishes on which he published while still an undergraduate [his first paper in a scientific journal: Oliva, O. 1950. Notes on collec-

tion of fishes obtained by Professor J. Komárek in Macedonia. *Věstník čs. zool. spol. (Acta Soc. Zool. Bohemoslovenicae)* 14: 229–262]. His initial thesis focused on sexual dimorphism in fishes (1950), his C.Sc. (doctoral) thesis on the fish ecology and population dynamics in the Elbe River waters (1958), and his 'docent' dissertation on lampreys and fishes of the Czech Republic (1964). Later he published taxonomic studies on some African and Asian fishes.

Hykeš once admitted that Otík was merely led by him to study fishes but that it was Hrbáček who taught him hard work and scientific rigor. It was also Hrbáček who brought Otík to the Elbe River pools and to the study of fish ecology. Ultimately, these initial studies on age and growth, density and ichthyomass in natural waters, including the use of



Fig. 2. At the entrance to the Viničná 7 building where Charles University zoology has been and is located. Otík with Eugene in 1991 together again after 20 years (photograph by C. Flegler-Balon).



Fig. 3. A selection of self-caricatures by Ota Oliva who often called himself 'Ušatý' (Big eared).

piscicides and of capture-mark-recapture assessment methods (1955–1960) triggered an avalanche of theses under his supervision as well as international recognition (Fig. 4).

Much later, Otík found his way to the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, where in the laboratories of professor Zygmund Grodziński much of his work in morphology was initiated. He published extensively on the respiratory surface of gills, anatomy of eye muscles and the myodome (eye muscle canals). It was the only work Otík ever had done abroad and while doing it, he nearly got married to a charming lady colleague. Haunted by his parents' fate, we think, after many years of hesitation and agony he deferred and remained single for the rest of his life.

In the meantime, surrounded by a hostile regime, he became embittered and lonely (Fig. 5). This peaked when his father died in 1970 and led to 'The lost weekend'-like solutions and distrustful or grouchy behavior. The regime's faithful used it as an excuse for further persecuting him. He lost nearly 20



Fig. 4. Ota Oliva accompanies Vadim Vladykov, another graduate from Charles University but half a century before us, on his 1965 visit to Prague from Canada.



Fig. 5. Ota Oliva in 1976 when 50 years old.

years during which his professional accomplishments and number of publications could have doubled. Nonetheless, he published books on local fishes and teaching manuals. He worked on and off for the last 20 years at the monumental work on 'Petromyzontes and Osteichthyes' for the series 'Fauna of the Czech and Slovak republics'. Co-edited with V. Baruš (Fig. 6), it was published in April 1995, four months after his death. In this 623 page volume 1 of 2, he is the main author of the general part which represents the ultimate textbook of ichthyology Otík never got around to publish separately.

During his lifetime Ota Oliva produced 151 refereed papers, authored and co-authored 8 books and 2 manuals, and over 400 other publications including non-refereed articles, reviews, biographies and obituaries. About 25% of his papers were on amphibian, reptilian and fish distribution, 40% on fish taxonomy, 20% on ecology and 15% on morphology. As a prolific letter writer, most of which were often distributed as multiple copies, his correspondence would amount to many volumes and would contribute much to our understanding of times and personalities.

Ota Oliva was an inspiring teacher. Though loaded with information, his lectures were clear and full of witty and amusing remarks. He supervised close to 50 master and 14 doctoral theses by local and foreign students. Because of his knowledge of German, English, Russian and Polish, he corresponded with ichthyologists around the world, many of whom appreciated his open manner and frankness, and flooded him with reprints and books. Otík had a phenomenal visual memory and was able to recite paragraphs verbatim from literature or type pages of references from memory. We all benefitted from this skill. Quite early he assembled a respectable collection of reprints and books which he kept in meticulous order and generously shared.

From his teenage years he remained faithful to the aquarium hobby. Early on he collaborated with Hykeš on 'Akvaristické listy', contributed many articles and introduced English abstracts which made the magazine known abroad. When the journal was terminated by the powers that were in 1951 Otík, in collaboration with various hobby groups across the country, managed to create an Aquarium and Terrarium Advisory Council within the Ministry of Culture. Recommended by the Council, a new journal 'Akvárium a terárium' was launched in 1958. Otík became its first editor-in-chief until 1967 and deserves credit for the high standards of the journal and of the tropical fish hobby in the country. His corner office on the top floor of Viničná 7, overlooking the botanical gardens, always had some large tanks in which for many years swam a huge electric eel, *Electrophorus electricus*, one or two giant megalobatrachus from China, and alligator gars from Cuba. The latter, we remember, were delivered and given to him by Antonín Novotný, Jr., the son of the then president of Czechoslovakia, an aquarist who helped Otík start the new aquarium magazine.

Ota Oliva lived his entire life in an old apartment building on Čermákova 8, Praha-Vinohrady, owned by his father and uncle, in a flat furnished in art nouveau style and full of his father's history and economical geography books as well as his own reprints and books. During all the communist times when he lived in fear of eviction, Otík commuted on foot the several kilometers distance between this apartment



Fig. 6. Ota Oliva (left) after receiving the G. Mendel's silver plaque for his contribution to biology from Vlastimil Baruš (photograph by J. Závěta, 12 December 1986).

and his office. Each of us experienced the long walks between these two points, often late at night after leaving the office and unable to leave the ongoing debate unfinished. When the destination was reached prematurely the discussion ended by going back and forth. Tall and very thin, Otík was a powerful walker who refused to use public transportation or taxi most of the time, and nearly wore out one of us during the last visit (Fig. 7).

As we mentioned before, Oliva became the first full-time professional ichthyologist in the country which, in spite of its large pond culture since the Middle Ages, had none before, except for Vadim Vladykov<sup>1</sup> who emigrated long time ago and was a non-native anyhow. Thanks to his infectious enthusiasm and sharing personality Otík was soon joined

by others, including the three of us, not only at the Charles University but at other places of post-secondary education and research institutions. A small landlocked country became an ichthyological world-class power. Unfortunately, that period not only started with Otík but ended with him. Given the long deserved promotion to a full professor only after the demise of communism, Otík was soon asked to retire and died shortly after Czechoslovakia ceased to exist. By an unfortunate twist of fate his professional life coincided with the life-span of communism<sup>2</sup> in Czechoslovakia; otherwise Ota Oliva would probably have been among the famous world-wide ichthyologists.

Long ago Otík wrote his own epitaph which expresses well his character of self-mockery and cyn-

<sup>1</sup> See 'On lampreys and fishes: a memorial anthology in honor of Vadim D. Vladykov' by D.E. McAllister & E. Kott, *Env. Biol. Fish.* 23 (1–2) and *Developments in Env. Biol. Fish.* 8, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> A much more extensive biography and lifetime list of publications of Ota Oliva will appear in the *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Biologica*.

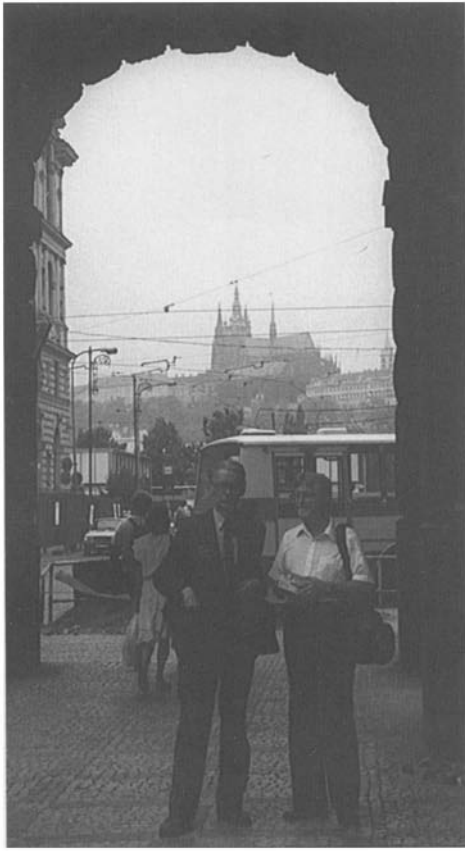


Fig. 7. In 1991 as a guide through Prague to Eugene Balon from Canada (photograph by C. Flegler-Balon).

icism during the second half of his life. One of us kept it on file:

**Poutníče, uhní, nepřistupuj k hrobu blíž  
je zahrabán tu “Ušatý” – katův tovaryš.  
Pro vážnou práci vědeckou neschopen a zcela tup,  
nevinným laborantkám kloval nitro jako sup.**

Which can be translated as follows:

*Pilgrim, step aside, don't move closer to the grave,  
buried here is the “Big eared” – hangman's slave.  
Unfit for serious scientific work and totally dumb,  
he lived off insides, like a vulture, of innocent laboratory moms.*

It is the only lie we ever caught him at!