

P Professor Jiří Vicherek (1929–2019)

By Milan Chytrý

Jiří Vicherek, a leading Czech botanist and vegetation ecologist, Emeritus Professor at Masaryk University, Brno, died on 16 January 2019. He was one of the best experts in vegetation diversity and ecology of continental landscapes of eastern-central and south-eastern Europe. The circumstances of life in communistic eastern Europe of the second half of the 20th century did not allow him to fully develop and realize all his research ideas and plans. Still, he left us a heritage of valuable descriptions of now-vanished habitats, and made a key contribution to the establishment of the current research in vegetation science at Masaryk University.

He was born on 28 December 1929 in Petřvald, a small miner's town in the Czech part of Silesia, but the family had to flee after the 1938 occupation of this area. During World War II his father was arrested because of his involvement in anti-Nazi resistance.

In 1951–1956 Vicherek studied Botany at Masaryk University in Brno. At that time, the botanical research there was strongly influenced by the work of Professor Josef Podpěra (1878–1954), an excellent field botanist, phytogeographer, flora writer and bryologist. His successor and Vicherek's main teacher, Jan Šmarda (1904–1968), further developed these topics but putting increasingly more emphasis on vegetation studies, especially in the Carpathian Mountains, eastern Bohemian Massif and the adjacent forest-steppe lowlands of the northern Pannonian Basin. Vicherek continued this tradition by developing a program of systematic research of vegetation in central and south-eastern European forest-steppe areas.

After his graduation in 1956, Vicherek enrolled in a three-year postgraduate study (corresponding to PhD) in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Brno. His dissertation thesis was about the vegetation of an inland delta of the Dyje River in South Moravia, an extensive wetland ecosystem that was destroyed by the construction of water reservoirs two decades later.

In 1959 Vicherek returned to Masaryk University and focused his research on continental saline vegetation of South Moravia and southern Slovakia. Travelling on a small motorbike, he visited most of the sites supporting this vegetation in the Pannonian part of Czechoslovakia. The results were summarized in his habilitation thesis (1965), further developed into the book *Die Pflanzengesellschaften der Halophyten- und Subhalophytenvegetation der Tschechoslowakei* (*Plant communities of halo-*



Jiří Vicherek at a field excursion on the temporarily drained bottom of the largest Moravian fishpond Nesyt, August 2007

phytic and subhalophytic vegetation of Czechoslovakia, Academia, Prague, 1973). Already at that time, it was obvious that saline habitats were disappearing or likely to disappear in the near future due to large-scale draining and agricultural intensification. Consequently, this monograph remains a valuable document describing the vanished vegetation and floristic diversity of this habitat in former Czechoslovakia. In his later years, Professor Vicherek often said, with noticeable nostalgia, that so many places he studied when young had irreversibly lost their diversity of specialized flora and unique vegetation types.

After his habilitation in 1965, Vicherek became an Associate Professor at Masaryk University, then renamed to J. E. Purkyně University. He taught courses in ecological botany and vegetation science and extended his geographic area of interest. He had a good knowledge of the forest-steppe vegetation complex in the area at its western distributional limit in central Europe, but for its correct interpretation, comparisons with the core areas in the east were needed. However, data from the east



Student Jiří Vicherek waiting for a train while returning from fieldwork, with a herbarium, May 1953 (photo: archive of the Department of Botany and Zoology, Masaryk University).

were nearly absent at the quality and level of detail that would be necessary for the phytosociological approach adopted by Vicherek. Therefore he decided to collect such data himself. In spite of the strong restrictions on foreigners travelling to the Soviet Union, he succeeded in using a touristic boat trip on the Dnieper River for sampling vegetation plots along a north-south transect across Ukraine, from the forest zone north of Kiev through the forest-steppe zone to the steppe zone at the Black Sea. The phytosociological study based on these data, together with a parallel study of coastal dune vegetation in Bulgaria, both published in *Folia Geobotanica et Phytotaxonomica* in 1971 and 1972, were the first, and for the next two decades perhaps the only studies applying the methods of formal syntaxonomy in these areas. At the same time, Vicherek was working on a detailed survey of dry grassland and sand grassland vegetation in the forest-steppe of South Moravia. He established a laboratory of soil analyses at his Department, enabling him to study details of the vegetation–soil relationships.

He was not working in isolation, exchanging letters and reprints with several vegetation scientists from abroad. In the period of partial political liberalization after the mid-1960s, he succeeded in obtaining permission to

travel to West Germany, where he visited the phytosociological centre of Professor Reinhold Tüxen. Such an opportunity was rare for Eastern European scientists at that time, and Vicherek used it to establish friendly contacts with both Tüxen and international vegetation scientists visiting Tüxen's institute. In later years, Vicherek had a large picture on a wall in his university office, looking like a piece of abstract art. It was a mirror image of a soil profile wall captured onto cloth with an adhesive substance, created by Tüxen and given to Vicherek as a present.

In 1968 Czechoslovakia was occupied by the armies of the Warsaw Pact, and liberalization was replaced by two decades of political oppression. Many liberal academics were forced to leave universities, and if they did not succeed or did not want to leave the country, they had to accept inferior jobs. Vicherek was one of them. First, his position at the university was changed from Associate Professor to Technician, and then he was fired in 1975. He tried to apply for an alternative job in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which was slightly more liberal than universities at that time, but his application was declined for political reasons. Moreover, he was prohibited from publishing, which concerned even scientific papers that had nothing to do

with politics. He had to accept a job in a Soviet-type cooperative agricultural farm, where he spent the next 15 years, with no hope of future continuation of his scientific career.

The Velvet Revolution of 1989, which ended the four decades of communistic government in Czechoslovakia, opened the way to the rehabilitation of people who had been repressed by the regime. Vicherek accepted an invitation to return to Masaryk University, and he became a full Professor in 1990. His main task was to restore the botanical Department, which had been formally cancelled, with only three academic staff members left and no study programmes in botany or plant ecology. Formerly extensive research was reduced to casual studies of local or at best of national significance. Fortunately, the herbarium and extensive botanical

library were still preserved. Professor Vicherek, then already at his sixties, started his restoration work with great enthusiasm. It was not easy, because there were very few graduates in Botany who would be suitable and available for academic jobs, earlier contacts with other institutions (especially those from abroad) had been broken, botanical and ecological curricula had to be established anew, and in the first years after political change, funding opportunities were extremely restricted. Also, access to international scientific literature was very poor: electronic sharing of papers did not yet exist, and the only significant international journal received by the Department was *Journal of Vegetation Science*, provided to Vicherek for free by Eddy van der Maarel thanks to funding from the IAVS. This generous



Jiří Vicherek (in the middle) participating in a soil science excursion with Professor Josef Pelíšek, who is demonstrating the rendzina soil in a *Sesleria caerulea* grassland, 1960s (photo: archive of the Department of Botany and Zoology, Masaryk University).

support undoubtedly attracted some Department members to vegetation science research.

In spite of these difficulties, Professor Vicherek managed to appoint a few young botanists, with whom he started to restore all the lost infrastructure and functions of an academic institution. Being his first PhD student, I had a unique opportunity to be a part of this process. Although at that time we sometimes felt our situation as a significant handicap in comparison with colleagues working at the established well-functioning institutions, actually it was an excellent school that taught us how to effectively organize an academic institution, and how to do meaningful research even in the periods of funding shortages. The first research projects in the early 1990s for which Professor Vicherek was able to obtain funding had budgets corresponding to 1000–2000 euros/year. They focused on surveys of a planned national park and other protected areas in the area of the former Iron Curtain, a strip of land along the Czech-Austrian border with prohibited access in the communistic period, and consequently well-preserved natural habitats. Vicherek loved botanical fieldwork, and he participated in large part of the field survey for these projects. The evenings after the fieldwork with some beers in a local village pub were unforgettable times, when he told us stories both from the good part of his life before 1968 and from the worse part thereafter. We perceived him not only as an experienced botanist but especially as a great example of moral integrity.

In a few years, Professor Vicherek restored a well-functioning Department of Systematic Botany and Geobotany at Masaryk University. With the continuing transformation of institutions and economy in the Czech Republic during the 1990s, funding became available for more ambitious projects that could develop research topics of international relevance, in addition to the nationally important topics. Vicherek retired as the Head of the Department in 1996 and kept his office of Emeritus Professor until 2005. During his Emeritus period, he carefully processed his old herbarium collections, deposited them in the Department's herbarium, and stored the hand-written relevés from his old note-



Jiří Vicherek as the Head of the Department of Systematic Botany and Geobotany, Masaryk University, early 1990s (photo: archive of the family Vicherek).

books in electronic databases. But the most important heritage Professor Vicherek left behind is the well-established academic institution that continues to develop active research in his field, vegetation science. After the previous dramatic changes in his life, he considered this to be his greatest professional achievement and personal satisfaction.