

Jaromir Malek

(October 5, 1943–May 23, 2023)



Photo courtesy of The Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, 2009.

Jaromír Málek was born on 5 October 1943 in Přibyslav (Bohemia) during the Nazi occupation of a territory that was then called the Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren. By the time he was five, his country had gone from being controlled by one totalitarian regime to another, the Soviet Union, so his early life can fairly be described as challenging. It says much about Jaromir that he was never one to complain about the fact.

He developed an interest in history and the ancient world during his school years and went on to study at the Charles University in Prague around the time when the (then) Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology was founded. Its first director, Zbyněk Žába, was influenced by his own teacher Jaroslav Černý to invite students to take part in the UNESCO rescue campaigns in Egyptian Nubia, and so beginning in 1963, Jaromir was a member of the team working on the Czechoslovak concession alongside archaeologists, inspectors, and field workmen, notable among them the foreman Abdu el-Kereti, the physician and anthropologist Eugen Strouhal, and fellow student Miroslav Verner. The direct, practical training he gained in field epigraphy was concerned primarily with the rock inscriptions of the region, and provided a model for future work with texts in their material contexts. In 1965, Jaromir took his doctorate in Egyptology from the Charles University.

He was invited to Oxford and the Griffith Institute in 1967. Černý, who held the professorial chair at the time, was instrumental in this move, and Jaromir was assigned to the *Topographical Bibliography* project, led by Rosalind

Moss. In 1968 he was offered, and accepted, a full-time post. This was another challenging time, as the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact meant that Czechoslovak citizens studying and working abroad faced an impossible choice: to give up their freedom, or to give up their country and families. Jaromir decided to stay in Oxford, expecting never to see his Czech family and friends again. He was occasionally able to meet Czechoslovak Egyptologists in Egypt, for instance during the Abusir field season of 1970, but this ended when their fieldwork opportunities were curtailed by Soviet-backed authorities.

Jaromir became the editor of the *Topographical Bibliography* after Moss retired in 1970. In 1980, his role was extended to include that of Keeper of the Griffith Institute Archive, one of the world's largest specialized archives dedicated to ancient Egyptian civilization, which holds records from over two hundred years of research. He thus became responsible for the archive of Howard Carter's excavation of the tomb of Tutankhamun which, in the absence of full publication, is a unique resource for Egyptologists and historians. Jaromir took his role as its custodian very seriously, and during his professional life helped countless researchers access the data. Gatekeeping, so frequent in academia, was never his style; Jaromir was a mentor, a supporter, and an enabler.

He remained professionally active throughout his life. From 1995 to 1999, Jaromir was the President of the International Association of Egyptologists. As an active member of the Egypt Exploration Society—he was to remain a member for fifty years, until his death—he took part in their archaeological excavations in Memphis and Saqqara. He published over 150 books and articles, and in keeping with his views on making Egyptological information accessible he sought to write professionally and concisely: the *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, co-authored with John Baines, is a prominent example.

Jaromir was among the first Egyptologists to realize the potential of the emerging Internet, and the Griffith Institute soon housed one of the first accessible humanities websites. He put his efforts and energy into digitizing the substantial Carter archive, and the result, *Tutankhamun: Anatomy of an Excavation*, pioneered the digital accessibility of archival material for the international research community. In 2003 he answered the question “We Have the Tombs. Who Needs the Archives?” by observing that archaeological heritage is under constant threat in an expanding world, and therefore that online dissemination is essential if information is not to be lost. The plethora of websites dedicated to such dissemination that have since emerged is a testament to his belief in online platforms and in making information readily accessible to all who seek it.

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 meant that Czechoslovak Egyptology could return to the world, and that Jaromir could return to Prague, to teach at the Charles University and to reconnect with family and friends. Jaromir retired from his role at the Griffith Institute in 2012 but continued to engage in research and, among other things, completed an edition of the graffiti from the Serapeum together with John Ray. Once free of administrative tasks and the daily office grind, Jaromir took the opportunity to renew his interest in the study of languages, refreshing his knowledge of Old Kingdom Egyptian, classical Arabic, and contemporary French, and tackling Portuguese. He would carry small flash-cards with words and grammatical paradigms even when travelling on public transport. He also revived a social pastime from his early days in Oxford: chess. It always provided him with an opportunity to meet diverse and interesting people.

He took great care to avoid enclosing himself in any form of ivory tower elitism. Jaromir's innate openness may have masked his intellectual rigour, but while he could—and would—challenge colleagues and friends, he would always listen; always provide a space for learning. He tested himself by the same measures he used to challenge others, focused on getting work done and on making a difference. His disinterest in self-promotion and ceremony did not always serve him well, but the appreciation shown by his Griffith Institute team and colleagues worldwide was genuine.

Jaromir Malek's life was enriched by an exceptional partnership with Jane Jakeman. It was enlivened by people in Egyptological organizations worldwide and tempered by individuals working outside the privileged university environment, with whom he always felt at home. He will be remembered for his professional contributions, for his generous hospitality—which could extend to inviting almost an entire conference into his and Jane's front room—and for his skills as a gardener. I last spoke to him only days before his death, and in this last conversation, as in every conversation, his intellect and his generous personality were fully present.

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