

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

Obituary of Ing. Věra Mokrá, CSc. (1932–2023)

A prominent scientist in the field of plant virology, our dear colleague Mrs. Ing. Věra Mokrá, CSc., passed away on July 20, 2023. Over the course of almost sixty years (from 1959 to 2008, when she finally retired), Věra Mokrá played a key role in the research of ornamental plant viruses. She was not only one of the founders of the field of virology of ornamental plants in Czechoslovakia, but she also contributed to its significant development and managed to raise the research level to the world level within several decades (Bojňanský 1992). It is very important to remember her difficult life, often literally pioneering work and rich professional career in a nutshell.

Věra Mokrá was born on January 18, 1932 in Prague. She graduated from grammar school in 1951. Later she graduated from the University of Agriculture in Prague and, in 1955, she was awarded a Master's degree in the field of plant protection; in her diploma thesis, she dealt with the pea anthracnose. In 1957, she started working as a mycologist at the Research Institute of Ornamental Gardening in Průhonice (VÚOZ) (now called the Silva Tarouca Research Institute for Landscape and Ornamental Gardening in Průhonice) where perhaps, just to illustrate the situation at the time, she commuted from Prague to work on a motorcycle. The same year, she also obtained the opportunity to do an external post-graduate degree at the former Institute of Biology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. She defended, in 1961, her doctoral thesis in the field of biological sciences on the topic "Contribution to the identification of primula viruses" and thus definitively switched to virology. Soon, she began to solve one scientific problem after another, literally churning out a multitude of results and publications. During the following decades, she focused mainly on viral diseases of tulips, chrysanthemums, carnations, gladiolus, hyacinths, daffodils, orchids, dahlias, freesias, geraniums, gerberas, hydrangeas and also a number of species of ornamental trees. She also worked on the research of viroids, mainly with geraniums, chrysanthemums and carnations. Věra Mokrá was the author or co-author of nearly two hundred journal papers (many of which were published in international journals with a significant impact), provided many contributions to conferences and seminars and contributions to collective book publications and encyclopaedias. Under her leadership, virology in VÚOZ soon reached a top scientific level and, eventually, the workplace was fully equipped, including very advanced technologies and instruments, as well as an electron microscope, for that time.

An important and enriching part of Věra Mokrá's activities was also her work for small and important growers and breeders whose material she tested for the presence of various viruses using the ELISA method, which eventually became an important source of scientific material. Many of these specimens were stored in the Collection of Ornamental Plant Viruses which Věra Mokrá founded in the 1950s. Unfortunately, a large number of results, especially of this small diagnostic work, remained published only in the form of final research and annual reports and personal notes, and has therefore largely disappeared. We can only deeply regret that Věra Mokrá did not write a comprehensive monograph summarising her entire scientific work and broad knowledge of the field. This period (1960s–1990s) also saw the peak of research and diagnostics of plant viral diseases in the former Czechoslovakia (Bojňanský 1992).



Věra Mokr had a rich knowledge of foreign languages (English, French, German, Russian, Dutch) which enabled her to maintain extensive contacts with foreign scientists. She participated in many international conferences and was also active in the international field, e.g., in 1980 and 1992, she organised the 5th and 8th International Scientific Horticultural Society (ISHS) Symposium on Viral Diseases of Ornamental Plants in Prague. She was active in international organisations and their various committees, for example, she was a member of the Working Group for Viral Diseases of Ornamental Plants of the ISHS and a member of the Panel for the Certification of Ornamental Plants for Pathogens of the European Plant Protection Organization (EPPO). She also worked in various committees of the Academy of Agricultural Sciences of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and Czechoslovakia (Plant Protection Commission, Horticultural Commission, Department of Crop Production) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (Commission for the Coordination of Research and the Production of Antiserums). In 1996, she became one of founding members of the Czech Society for Plant Pathology (CSPP) (Lebeda & Komnek 2023) and, in the subsequent years, she very efficiently and enthusiastically served as a member of the CSPP committee.

Věra Mokr was a really strong personality which is also confirmed by the fact that despite her not exactly easy personal life, she managed to develop rich and wide professional activities while resisting the political pressures and not joining the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, even though it would have greatly facilitated her professional growth and made her life much easier. This may have been the reason why, despite her extraordinary scientific skills and merits, she did not achieve recognition and a leading position in our country until after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Ing. Mokr retired on January 1, 1992, but for the next two decades, she continued her part-time work at the Silva Tarouca Research Institute for Landscape and Ornamental Gardening (as VUOZ was later renamed) and, thus, spent her entire professional life there.

The personal life of Mrs. Věra Mokr was not easy either. After graduating from university, she got married and the couple had two daughters, Radana and Jana. Her husband as a physicist, was subsequently sent to work in Heidelberg, the Federal Republic of Germany (then West Germany) and his wife and daughters accompanied him. However, her husband refused to return home after completing his internship so Věra Mokr returned alone with her daughters and raised both of them completely alone. Věra Mokr maintained an active approach to life and optimism until late in life despite increasing health problems, she devoted herself to travelling which always attracted her very much. Recently, she took a dream trip to Turkey.

Věra Mokr was an energetic and extremely hardworking woman, very inquisitive, bright and always open minded. She was kind to young people and was always willing to help and participate not only in solving various scientific challenges, but also in practical phytopathological problems. Despite the difficulties she had to overcome, Věra Mokr lived a rich and perhaps even happy life. Let us, therefore, keep her in our memory not only as an important scientific personality who managed to build the field of virology of ornamental plants in the former Czechoslovakia during politically difficult years and raise it to a world level, but also as an optimistic, friendly, agile, principled and strong person who never gave up and who was always able to follow her own path.

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Veronika Strnadov, Marcela Mrzkov, Pruhonice, Czech Republic