

Rudolf Veselý, 1931–2020

Sadly, Rudolf Veselý, a long-time member of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, passed away on February 8, 2020, at the age of 88 in Prague, Czech Republic. The scholarly community has lost the founder and pioneer of critical studies of Mamluk chancery manuals and formularies, an expert on Egyptian diplomatics, and an outstanding master of classical Arabic. His students have lost a devoted teacher and fierce champion.

Veselý was born on April 28, 1931, in the East Bohemian city of Hradec Králové but soon afterwards moved to Prague with his parents, Rudolf and Marta. While still in high school, his early interest in entomology stimulated his study of the Arabic language. Indeed, his commitment to learning Arabic was primarily motivated by his ardent desire to visit the Middle East to collect beetles, a trip that required a good knowledge of the language.¹

After World War II, the Oriental Institute in Prague renewed their Arabic language courses and Veselý enrolled in one in 1947. In 1950, after his admission to the Faculty of Science had been denied, he instead joined the Faculty of Arts at Charles University to study Arabic and Persian. His lecturers included, among others, Felix Tauer, Jan Rypka, Rudolf Růžička, and Karel Petráček. He completed his studies in 1955 and successfully defended his diploma thesis on the Ansar Rebellion in Medina in 683 and the Battle of al-Harra. He went straight on to become a lecturer in the Department of Near Eastern and Indian Studies, teaching the reading of Arabic and translation, as well as lecturing in the language school. Later, he succeeded his previous teacher, Felix Tauer, taking over his lecture duties on Middle Eastern History. He intended to continue to focus on early Islamic history and sources in his dissertation, but it was not meant to be. The dramatic changes in Egypt after the accession of President Gamal Abdel Nasser proved to

I am indebted to Jana Součková, Professor Veselý's daughter, for her invaluable help, support of my work, and access to her father's photo archive. My thanks also go to my colleagues Jakub Rumpl, for allowing me to handle and use Veselý's papers, and Eduard Gombár and Jitka Malečková, for details of his life. On Veselý's career, see Ladislav Bareš, "Prof. PhDr. Rudolf Veselý, CSc.," *Pražské egyptologické studie* 24 (2020): 115–17; Luboš Kropáček, "Anniversary: Rudolf Veselý Septuagenarian," *Archiv Orientální* 69 (2001): 511–14; Viktor Bielický, "Prof. Rudolf Veselý—Bibliography (1953–2001)," *Archiv Orientální* 69 (2001): 515–23.

¹This passion for entomology proved to be lifelong, and he even donated his collection to the National Museum in Prague before he died.





Rudolf Veselý, 1931-2020 (Photo Courtesy of Jana Součková)

be the indirect cause of Veselý becoming a specialist on Arab and Egyptian diplomatics.

In the 1950s, the Egyptian Minister of Education, Muṣṭafá Kāmil Murād, decided to drop English as the primary foreign language being taught and instead supported the teaching of other languages. Czech became one of them as it was the dominant mother tongue of fraternal socialist Czechoslovakia. Subsequently, a post teaching the Czech language was established at the Higher School of Languages in Cairo and Veselý was awarded the position in 1958. The totalitarian communist regime, which had ruled in Czechoslovakia since 1948, did not generally allow freedom of travel, so the opportunity to teach in Cairo was the first possibility Veselý had to realize his boyhood dream and visit the Middle East. It also provided him the opportunity to enhance his knowledge of classical Arabic, learn the colloquial language, and obtain practical experience of living in Egyptian society.

He travelled to Cairo in December 1958 following the birth of his only daughter, Jana, in November. He spent his first year in Egypt on his own, and it was only after the summer break of 1959 that he was able to bring his wife, Zdenka, and their daughter back with him to Egypt for the 1959–60 academic year. He briefly returned to Prague to work in 1960 but went back to Cairo in 1962, again with his wife, where they both became lecturers of Czech, tasked specifically with helping Egyptian students to conclude their last year of Czech studies. In April 1963, a decision was made that resulted in some students having to repeat parts of their studies. This translated into an extension of Veselý's stay for one further year. His two stays in Egypt proved to be an invaluable source for his teaching and provided personal experiences that he fondly recalled for the rest of his life. He loved teaching Arabic and was always keen to help his students in Prague as well as in Cairo. Indeed, his passion for teaching stayed with him throughout his entire career.

In Cairo, he lived in Heliopolis and remembered his walks in the area, and the locals who took him in, with great affection. His family employed an Egyptian nanny and he liked to tell stories about his daughter learning colloquial Arabic from her so well that she was able to speak it in the 1990s when his son-in-law, Jan Souček, was working as a lecturer of Czech at Ain Shams University. On another occasion, he told us how he overheard a piece of classical poetry being recited in Heliopolis and realized that his knowledge of poetry and his vocabulary were so advanced that he was able to comprehend it without any help. We were able to observe this for ourselves many years later in his courses on Arabic and Mamluk poetry and poetics, courses that he continued to teach year after year, and which he clearly loved. His knowledge of classical Arabic vocabulary was absolutely phenomenal. He knew many obscure words and their multiple meanings. This



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DOI: [10.6082/pmsk-9358](https://doi.org/10.6082/pmsk-9358). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/pmsk-9358>)

was a great help in his work with manuscript materials, and it helped many of us in translation situations that would, without his assistance, have proved impenetrable for us.

While in Egypt, Veselý began collecting material for his dissertation thesis. Initially he wanted to focus on the period of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt and the first decades of Ottoman rule that could be found in narrative sources. An encounter with Professor 'Abd al-Latīf Ibrāhīm of Cairo University in Giza, himself a pioneer in studies of Mamluk documents from the Cairo archives, turned his interest to diplomatics. They met during Veselý's first stay in Egypt and Ibrāhīm pointed out to him all the documents available at the *sharīyah* court (Mahkamat al-ahwāl al-shahsīyah, now held in Dār al-wathā'iq). Many of us know only too well how difficult it is to access source materials in the archives and libraries of Cairo, and how time-consuming it often is to obtain permission to view them. Veselý had no such difficulties. He reminisced, in a humorous way, about how his employer confirmed that he was an employee of the university and a long-term resident in the country: "So they wouldn't be concerned that I was there to steal something. That's how I got to see the documents, quite easy." He understood that this was a unique achievement:

Another colleague from America notes in one of his books that it took him over a year to receive permission to visit that [court] archive. However, he did not get to see the documents at all; he was only given a catalogue that he subsequently transcribed and published. I had access not just to the catalogue but also to the documents, which I photographed during my first stay, down in the basement where they were stored. During my second stay, I got all the documents spanning the entire century which I wanted to process directly from them at the court.²

On that occasion he was able to get photographs of all the available documents covering the period from ca. 1517 to ca. 1600, and to examine them on the spot. However, despite this early successful access, and even though he revisited Egypt in 1967, in 1970, and several times in the 1990s, he never again viewed the original documents or worked with them directly. He continued to work with photographs and microfilms, and his extensive collection of those is now kept in the Library of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies. It should be noted that Veselý's wife, Zdenka, also focused on documentary studies in her dissertation, and subsequently on Ottoman documents from Sinai.

In 1964, Veselý returned to the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. He was allowed to travel overland from Egypt and he visited one of the most renowned

²"Osudy Rudolfa Veselého," Český rozhlas Vltava, Prague, February 25, 2014.



papyrologists of his time, Adolf Grohmann, in Innsbruck. Previously, Felix Tauer had shared his contacts with Veselý, including Hans Robert Roemer, then Director of the German Institute of Archeology in Cairo, and other German experts. Veselý was thus able to build a network of contacts that helped him acquire literature and, to an extent, aided him in publishing abroad. Within the department, he also became head of the library.

In the summer of 1964, while still in Egypt, Veselý was able to conclude his dissertation on the *waqfīyah* of Maḥmūd Pasha from 974/1567. He successfully defended it in 1966. An extensive edition in three volumes that included diplomatics, architectural, and thematic studies with commentary, it unfortunately remains in manuscript form only.³ It is an exemplary thesis and, for its time, an innovative piece of scientific research. It is no exaggeration to say that it made Veselý a leading expert on sixteenth century *waqfs*. It was published in 1971, but only as a facsimile followed by a brief commentary. Veselý published several other studies of early Ottoman *waqfs* in the 1960s and 1970s that were originally intended to form part of his habilitation thesis, "Four Studies from Cairo Archives." He was, however, not allowed to submit them.

Veselý used the body of documents that he had brought from Egypt to demonstrate the continuity between Mamluk and Ottoman diplomatics and legal practices. He prepared a systematic introduction for studies of diplomatics of court documents from the Cairo archives, as well as two complex studies of legal authentication methods in court documents (*‘alāmah, ‘unwān*). He was only able to publish the third volume dedicated to *imdā’* four decades later, in 2011. Apart from one seminal review, he was able to process further documents only after the fall of the Communist regime. His studies of Egyptian documents are renowned for their highly precise historical and philological character, and in many cases provide pioneering introductions to issues hitherto left untouched by academics. From today's perspective, their key drawback is that they were largely published in German, and many of them in less accessible journals. This resulted from the limited publishing possibilities at the time of their development, with these difficulties in publishing also impacting on Veselý's career at Charles University.

In 1968, the Soviet-led armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia. Subsequently, all Party members employed at the department were expelled from the Communist Party. Veselý's presence in the faculty, as he had no interest in politics and had never been a member of the Communist Party, was greatly diminished from the beginning of the "normalization" era of the early 1970s. He

³ *Nadační listina Maḥmūda paši z roku 974 h./1567 n. l.: Příspěvek ke studiu sociálně ekonomických poměrů Egypta v pozdním středověku a k arabské diplomatice* [The endowment deed of Maḥmūd Pasha (dated 974/1567): A contribution to the study of social-economic issues of Egypt in the late Middle Ages and Arabic Diplomatics]. 3 vols. Prague, 1965.



and his colleague and friend Karel Petráček discussed how to maintain the continuity of scientific endeavors, and how to maintain the legacy of Felix Tauer and Jan Rypka. They felt deeply frustrated by the entire situation, in which they had few students and the admission of new ones was severely limited. At one point, it seemed that the entire department would be abolished. This depressing situation was resolved in 1974, when a new, deeply committed member of the Communist Party was appointed department head. On the one hand, she preserved the existence of the department. On the other, however, she also had a crucial but negative impact on Veselý's professional and scientific career.

By 1967, Veselý had already started working on his second research interest, chancery manuals, and was preparing to publish *Tathqīf al-ta'rīf bi-al-muṣṭalaḥ al-sharīf* by Ibn Nāzir al-Jaysh. This was to be the very first critical edition of a Mamluk chancery manual. In 1969, he published his first study of the topic and completed the entire work in 1974, shortly after the appointment of the new department head. She, however, did not give approval for the publication, commenting that there were thousands of documents all over the world, so she did not see why that particular one should be singled out for publication (Veselý recounted this absurd conclusion consistently from that point on). Despite this disappointment, he remained at the department until 1980, when he joined a Czech engineering company, Strojexport, in Libya as an interpreter. A year later he left the university permanently. His new employer finally permitted him to print his edition of Ibn Nāzir al-Jaysh and the book was published in 1987 in Cairo.

In 1982, Veselý travelled from Libya to Czechoslovakia to attend the wedding of his daughter. For reasons unknown, the Communist authorities confiscated his passport during this trip, preventing his return to Libya, and thus forcing him to leave his position with Strojexport. The Communist head of the department blocked his re-employment at the university so, in September 1982, he began working as an ordinary lecturer at the State Language School—the only non-university institution that taught Middle Eastern languages—where, along with Arabic, he also taught Persian. Many of his colleagues there were his former students and, compared to the highly politicized environment of the Faculty of Arts, the school provided a quiet, amiable environment in which to teach. In the spring of 1983 he was appointed head of the Oriental Department. His departure from the university, his work at Strojexport, and, subsequently, at the language school slowed Veselý's scientific career for a time. He was only able to publish the seminal textbook on the *Auxiliary Sciences of History in Middle Eastern Studies* in 1988. In that same year, one of his former colleagues intervened on his behalf; his passport was returned and he was permitted to visit Iraq.

In 1989, during the Velvet Revolution and following the fall of Communism, an agreement was reached that all former department members who had been forced



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DOI: [10.6082/pmsk-9358](https://doi.org/10.6082/pmsk-9358). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/pmsk-9358>)

to leave the faculty for political or other untenable reasons would be permitted to return. In February 1990, at the age of 59, Veselý was finally able to rejoin the academic world. In the same year, he was appointed associate professor of Middle Eastern History and Culture, and in 1992, he became a full professor. Between 1991 and September, 2000, he held the position of Director of the Department of Middle Eastern and African Studies, a unique department in the country. He built up the department with vigor and enthusiasm. He reveled in teaching the new generations of students, and he shared his unique skills and knowledge with optimism and kindly humor. He worked at the department until 2005, when he was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus. He continued to lead courses until 2014.

In the 1990s, he was finally able to freely pursue his projects and research, take part in and organize conferences, and meet his colleagues in the West in person. It may seem surprising that someone who had been so curtailed in terms of opportunities for independent research could summon up the enthusiasm to, in effect, restart a new scientific career at the age of 60. Nonetheless, that is precisely what Veselý did in the field of Mamluk diplomatics. His first task was to start work on the edition of one of the collections of Ibn Nubātah. While studying Brockelmann, he encountered the name of Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī and the work *Qahwat al-inshā*⁴. He did not realize while hunting down microfilms and copies of manuscripts that it would be this book that would bring him the highest renown, as well as identify research paths that would occupy him for more than two decades.

Ibn Ḥijjah's work became his passion. Thanks to his sources, he was able to study Mamluk *taqārīz* and aesthetics and he embarked on tracking down two as yet unknown biographies of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh. He published two minor chancery handbooks of al-‘Umarī. In 2005, his definitive edition of Ibn Ḥijjah was published, the culmination of Veselý's precise historical and philological work and erudition. Due to its unique character, it became one of the most frequently used sources not just for studies of Mamluk diplomatics, but also Mamluk diplomacy in general. In 2000, Veselý also pointed out Mamluk documents in the Leiden manuscript of *Zuhrat al-nāzirīn wa-nuzhat al-nādirīn* but was, unfortunately, not able to complete the publication.

His most significant incomplete and unpublished work is an extensive (148 pages) analytical catalogue of documents that he obtained during his stays in Egypt. Before his death, he was able to complete almost the entire part focused on the Maḥkamah collection from Dār al-wathā'iq.⁴ For each document, he prepared

⁴ Veselý's collection of photographs consists of the following documents: Dār al-wathā'iq, Maḥkamah 277/43–312/46, 314/47–317/47, 319/47–340/50, and 342/50–343/50; Wizārat al-awqāf, ḥujaj al-waqf 82, 139, 432, 465, 503, 507, 520/1–2, 521/1–3, 522/1–3, 538, 539, 767, 768, 796, 820, 906, 908, 911, 918, 919, 1022, 1074, 1079, 1142, 1176, 1242, 1360, 1459, 2419, 2831, 2836, 2869, 3176; Dār al-



a thorough summary of its content, its diplomatics, and its external characteristics. He also identified several Mamluk documents or their early Ottoman copies omitted by Amīn. He did not live to see the publication of the second edition of the *History of Egypt*, in which he presented his synthesis of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

For his own personal interest, rather than as a specific part of his academic work, he translated two collections of historical stories into Czech, following on from his translation of Usāmah ibn Munqidh. He read to me from those in his Prague apartment at Vinohrady during my last visit. He spent many years of his happy and rewarding marriage to Zdenka Veselá-Přenosilová (1930–1998), a renowned Turkologist, in that apartment.⁵ They met during their studies and their entire life together was filled with mutual collaboration and inspiration. They found much joy in their daughter and their grandchildren, though only Veselý lived to see his great-grandchildren. Their apartment was a true oasis for several generations of students and colleagues and they welcomed visits from enthusiasts interested in Arabic and the Middle East. He never refused to help us and he expressed genuine interest in all of our topics. He retained his lifelong optimism and refused to be worn down by mishaps or obstacles. He lived and breathed the department and his family. He passed away in his sleep after a long and fulfilling life, secure in his reputation as the most prominent Czech Arabist of the past half-century, leaving behind many admirers who will continue to benefit from his research and talents for many years to come.

Kutub 1948/1, 1948/4, 1948/8, 6524¹. Maḥkamah 292/44, 293/44, 297/45, 300/45, and 302/45 contain Mamluk documents and are not listed by Amīn in his catalogue.

⁵ For the overview of her remarkable career see Christoph K. Neumann and Petr Štěpánek, “In Memoriam Zdenka Veselá,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 88 (1998): 9–13.



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DOI: [10.6082/pmsk-9358](https://doi.org/10.6082/pmsk-9358). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/pmsk-9358>)

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¹ Readers interested in Rudolf Veselý's hard-to-find publications are encouraged to contact the compiler of this list. Contact details: josef.zenka@ff.cuni.cz.



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DOI: [10.6082/pmsk-9358](https://doi.org/10.6082/pmsk-9358). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/pmsk-9358>)

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