

Vale Jiří Rondiak - 1934 – 2013

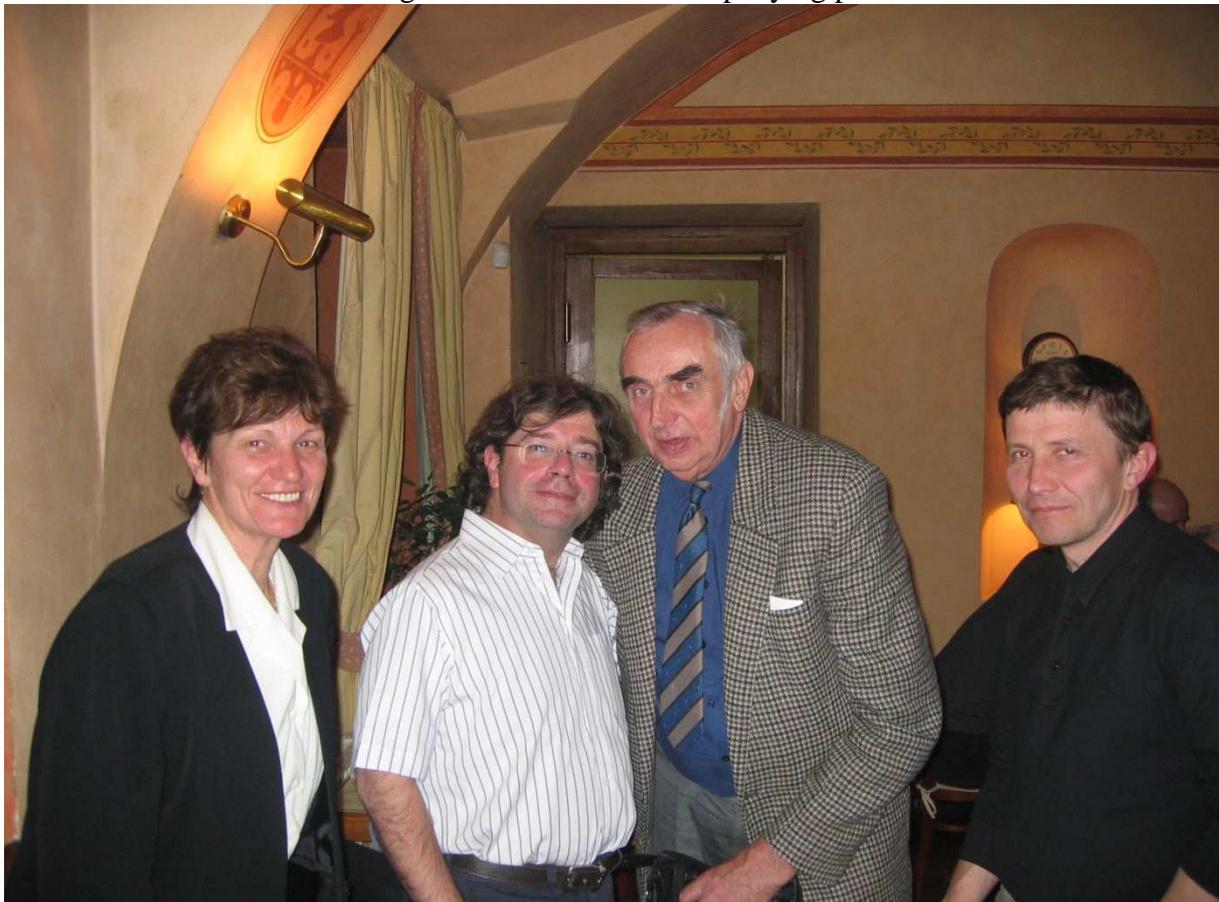
Albert Farrugia



Jiří Rondiak, an eminent Czech physician and specialist in blood transfusion died in September 2013 after a long illness. Rondiak was born in 1934 in Hořice v Podkrkonoší, a small East Bohemian town where his father was a renowned and loved general medical practitioner who died when Jiří was young, thus increasing his interest in the study of medicine. Over 1952 – 1959 he studied at the Medical Faculty of Charles' University in Prague and over 1959 – 1960 he worked at the Dept. of internal medicine in Hořice, and initially intended to specialize in obstetrics until he was impeded by a physical injury. Obstetrics' loss was transfusion's gain and in 1960 he started working at the Blood Bank of the Faculty Hospital in Hradec Králové, where he passed board examinations in blood banking and also underwent the Tropical medicine course of Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic. By 1977 he had been appointed head of the Blood Bank of the Faculty Hospital in Hradec Králové and was the Chief Blood transfusion specialist for the East Bohemian region, holding these posts until 2002 and to the 1990's respectively, responsible for the performance of the blood banks in the whole region. His achievements in his home environment included the building and continuous improvement of the transfusion service, including the challenges of infectious agents in the 1980s-90s and the establishment of one of the first plasmapheresis centres in the country as the Czech Republic emerged from the Russian-domination era and moved towards self sufficiency in blood products. His interests also included the HLA system and the stem cell area, in which he collaborated and published internationally.

Rondiak's eminence at home led to him engaging in several projects outside his country and he contributed to the development of blood services in Zambia, Malta and Yemen over the 1970s to the late 1980s. In Malta, he was one of a number of Czech specialists who helped the health service during the period 1979-82. In September 1979, as a young science graduate from the University of Malta I joined the blood transfusion unit of the Department of Pathology in Saint Luke's Hospital. It was there that I met Jiří who was trying to introduce improvements in a very basic and primitive service, and a partnership was born. It is no exaggeration to say that Jiří became my first professional mentor and was responsible, for better or for worse, for initiating my career. During his tenure, we initialized all the improvements in laboratory methods, donor screening and component production which led to a route of continuous progress and underpins the system today. Jiří worked tirelessly, as he told me frequently, to "leave something" behind him when he left. He certainly did, as he oversaw the transfer of the unit for two rooms in the pathology (out patients) corridor to the old nursing sisters house. He left this mission in 1982 and I returned to Malta in 1984 from my studies in the UK to continue his work with other Czech colleagues including Vladimír Vesely and Jan Pintera, all fine transfusionists who also contributed greatly to the development of the Maltese service.

Over the years since then, I'm pleased to have met Jiří several times in the international transfusion circuit after the changes in Eastern Europe led to travel restrictions being lifted. I continued my friendship with him, and in 2006 was honored with his presence in the audience when I spoke at an international plasma products conference in Prague. Seeing my old friend in the front row much affected me, and I made a few spontaneous remarks recognizing him and his fine country, and found myself needing to compose myself as I saw Jiří's clear emotion. Afterwards we walked around Prague for over three hours, and finished switch dinner with other Czech colleagues shown in the accompanying picture.



(Caption – Lenka Walterova, Albert Farrugia, Jiří Rondiak and Petr Turek enjoy a meal in Prague, March 2006).

I heard that he had suffered a stroke in September 2012 when I was in Prague again in October 2012 speaking at a haemophilia meeting. Unfortunately he was unable to receive visitors. A year later the news of his death in September 2013 was communicated to me by our mutual friend Lenka Walterova. He is survived by his wife and daughter, both physicians.

Jiří Rondiak was my mentor, and my friend. I admired him greatly, and as I have developed my own career, I recognize more the merits of his generation of transfusionists, who struggled hard for patients in adverse circumstances. Somehow, they still managed to deliver great outcomes, before this field became "transfusion medicine". Vale, dear Jiří. And thank you, for Malta, and for myself.