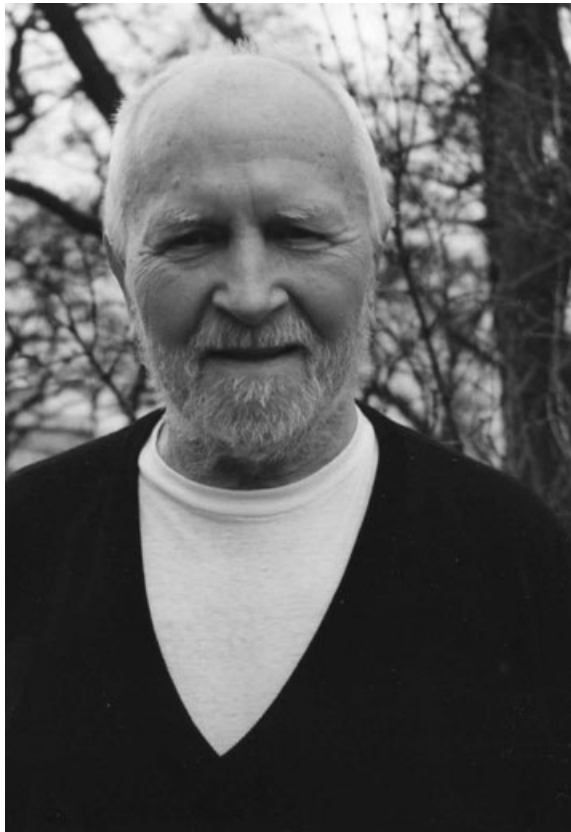


Jaroslav Skála (1916–2007): an international figure and doyen of Czech alcohol dependence treatment



Jaroslav Skála, the Czech initiator, founder and organizer of dozens of innovative enterprises for the benefit of people with alcohol-related problems, died in November 2007 aged 91 years.

Jaroslav was born in May 1916 in Plzeň (Pilsen), the Czech city known for its famous brewery. After having completed his secondary education in Plzeň, Jaroslav came to Prague to study medicine at Charles University. He also studied at the Institute for Physical Education and Sports. Jaroslav taught gymnastics at a secondary school during the war, when Czech universities were closed by the Nazi occupation of the country. He enjoyed this first work, and physical education influenced strongly his later professional career as a physician [1].

Jaroslav completed his medical studies in 1946 and in the same year he began to work as a physician at the in-patient psychiatric ward of the Charles University School of Medicine. His interest in the treatment of alcoholism (as the condition was designated at that time) began at the first post-war international meeting on

alcohol-related issues in Brussels, which he attended in 1946. He soon began to treat 'alcoholics' in the general psychiatric ward. In 1948 he founded a specialized ward for alcohol-dependent men within the university department of psychiatry. The treatment centre bore the name 'Apolinář', after the name of the street where it was located. Jaroslav headed this specialized ward (in later years treating clients addicted to other substances, and women) for 34 years until 1982. He developed successively a highly elaborate in-patient treatment system [2] combining many treatment elements, including aversive therapy with emetine and the use of disulfiram. The main emphasis from the beginning was on the Therapeutic Community which Jaroslav introduced, without knowledge of Maxwell Jones's work [3]. There were many other elements involved in Jaroslav's treatment centre, including physical activity and sports. Jaroslav believed that alcohol-dependent patients should be led strictly to self-discipline and should be exposed to stressful situations in order to develop their ability to overcome stress without the help of alcohol.

In his Apolinář centre, Jaroslav successively offered additional innovative services. His most internationally respected pioneer act was the foundation, in 1951, of the Prague detoxification (sobering-up) centre, run as a medical institution. Jaroslav claimed world-wide priority for this type of detoxification centre [4]. He inspired followers in many countries, e.g. David Pittman (United States), David Archibald (Canada) and E. B. Ritson (United Kingdom). To his delight, at one international meeting Jaroslav was entitled 'the father of the detox'. In order to attend professional meetings Jaroslav had to overcome the totalitarian bureaucracy of his country and finance his travels himself.

Skála introduced and organized many other services. His former patients participated in the activities of the socio-therapeutic club he founded. He also founded a consultation centre for children of parents with alcohol-related problems. He initiated anti-alcohol treatment offered to men serving sentences in jail. In these and still other initiatives he has been followed by others.

I had the opportunity to observe Jaroslav's work in detail in the 1970s during my work on a project aimed at the evaluation and analysis of his in-patient treatment programme. I was greatly impressed by Jaroslav's willingness to expose his life work to a researcher not affiliated with his centre. The study confirmed his own

previous reports concerning treatment outcome. In a 5-year follow-up of 544 former patients, 24% have been reported as continuous 5-year abstainers and an additional 18% have been described as continually improved. The figures have been even higher for those who have completed the full treatment stay. Acceptance of the treatment programme philosophy and the depth of insight into the patient's own illness were the treatment process factors predicting positive outcome. The strongest specific predictor was the degree of the client's identification with the principal therapist (i.e. Skála).

Jaroslav continued in professional work, which produced pioneering results after his resignation in 1982 from his head position in Apolinář. He organized a network of out-patient consultation centres for people with alcohol- and drug-related problems. He became an efficient organizer of training in psychotherapy. He founded and directed a private Institute of Psycho-

therapy; later he co-founded the Prague College of Psychosocial Studies. During my last conversation with Jaroslav in 2007 he invited me to take part in the research activities of the college.

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