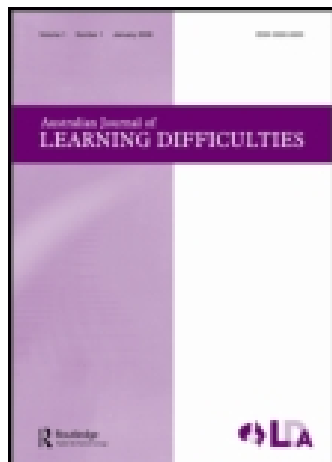


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### Obituary Zdenek Matejcek October 2004

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# OBITUARY

## ZDENEK MATEJCEK

### OCTOBER 2004

Professor Matejcek first visited Melbourne in July, 1982. He spoke to a number of educational institutions, child guidance centres and gave a series of seminars for SPELD.

Zdenek Matejcek was the Professor of Child Psychology at the Post Graduate Medical Institute in Prague.

He was a great supporter of our Journal and was on the Referee Panel when it became a fully refereed publication in 1996. He translated many of our articles into Czech for the benefit of his students. We will certainly miss him.

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## ZDENEK MATEJCEK

### A REMINISCENCE

**John McLeod**

Zdenek Matejcek, who died in Prague on October 25th, 2004, had attained a status somewhere between a national icon and a father figure in his own country. His death was announced on the main news bulletin of the day on Czech national TV and the evening programme schedule was changed in order to include a special feature on him. The page-wide headline of his obituary in a leading Czech daily announced that "The Man who Loved Naughty Children Dies". Hundreds attended his funeral.

In the Czech Republic, Dr Matejcek's work led to significant social change, remarkably during the communist period of the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. A film documentary "Children Without Love", derived from a major study of psychological deprivation in childhood. The film was won an award at the Cannes Film Festival, but banned from public viewing in Czechoslovakia. However, as Zdenek observed, "President Novotny was a communist, but he was also a grandfather" and maternity benefits introduced in Czechoslovakia which were in advance of those of many countries even today.

Dyslexia was also the focus of much of his clinical work, and continued up to the time of his death.

Internationally, Dr Matejcek is best known for the two major projects.

The results of the study of the effects of early psychological deprivation was captured vividly in the film "Children Without Love". The other project, a longitudinal study of children born from unwanted pregnancies is unique, not only for the 40-year period over which it was carried out, but also for its enhanced scientific validity which was largely due, ironically, to the fact that it was carried out in

what was - until 1989 - a totalitarian communist society. "Unwanted pregnancy" was defined as a child whose mother had applied for, and appealed, unsuccessfully for an abortion - a definition sufficiently objective to satisfy the most meticulous research scientist. Also, due to the restricted freedom of movement that Czechs had to endure and the internal passports which facilitated the location of individuals, the retention rate after nine years was 100 per cent! Even after 23 years, all 440 of the original cohort were still accounted for and at least 80 per cent were examined. Australia can claim some credit for introducing Dr Matejcek to the West. In 1964, he submitted an article to the University of Queensland journal *The Slow Learning Child*, which impressed the U.S. Orton Society (now "The International Dyslexia Association") sufficiently to request permission to reprint it in their *Bulletin*. Three years later he was invited as principal speaker at a world conference on dyslexia in Dallas, Texas, and a lecture tour of several U.S. cities. He was persuaded to return to Europe via Australia, where he met many teachers and other professionals and was invited to deliver a public lecture at the University of Queensland. His stature preceded him by word of mouth and his public lecture is still, I believe, the only one that had to be repeated - to overflow audiences on both occasions.

Existence in a communist state for a scientist with Zdenek's background was not easy. Because he was not a member of "the party", he did not achieve the highest academic rank in Czechoslovakia until the 1989 Gentle Revolution. But Zdenek was a survivor. Although not a visibly active dissident, he had close associations with them. The present writer recalls attending a meeting of several top Czech dissidents in 1987 at the farm that had been owned by the Matejcek family until confiscated by the Communist regime in 1948. Entry to the farm was by a gate, outside which a police car was stationed twenty-four hours a day.