

An Interview with Jitka Rychtaříková

To mark a significant anniversary in the life of Prof. Jitka Rychtaříková, we are bringing you a short interview with her.



When and why did you decide to pursue demography at the scientific level and as an educator?

It wasn't a long-term decision, but rather an accident. To some degree it's true that the world favours the prepared...

When we had to choose out thesis topic (I completed my studies in 1973 in geography at the Faculty of Sciences and in French at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University), I said to myself that the easiest thing would be to calculate something using the recent 1970 census, given that I had previously graduated from a general education secondary school in the maths and physics class. Prof. Zdeněk Pavlík at that time had just returned from the USA and had no dissertation students, and I was 'left' for him. He assigned me the topic of marriage. At that time, I knew only that demography deals with the study of population. Thanks to self-study, borrowing Prof. Pavlík's French textbooks, and the interest and help of JUDr. Vladimír Srb and Ing. Milan Kučera, I managed to write my master's thesis, the defence

of which was attended by the French demographer Roland Pressat, who then initiated my being invited to INED (Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques) in Paris. During my time at the Institute I also studied at Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne and obtained a diploma in Démographie générale. After returning to Prague, however, it was not at all easy to be employed at the university.

Can you think of a project you were involved in that surprised you with its outcome?

For me the US project 'Gestational Selection, Birth Weight and Infant Survival', supported by the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, was very important. It addressed the question of whether the better survival of babies born with a low birth weight is the result of biological or social factors. Although in the USA children born at low birth weight to African-American mothers had lower infant mortality rates than similar children of other races, in the Czech Republic this pattern was mainly true for children born to mothers with lower education. I should add that these results were standardised for age, birth order, marital status, and were specified by education.

Do you think that sufficient use is made of demographic data by people in positions of responsibility?

I would like to see greater use, especially in political decision-making – consider, for example, the recent discussions around pension reform. Here I feel the lack of comparisons with the situations and systems in other countries. I'd mainly place the emphasis on years worked and payments into the pension system and devote less discussion to the age of retirement.

Which demographic issue do you think is the most overrated and which is the most underrated?

I believe that the most overrated issue in the Czech Republic at this time is demographic ageing and foreign migration. The Czech Republic does not yet rank among the countries with the largest share of people aged 65+, and, unlike 'western' Europe, we have very few foreign migrants from 'third' countries.

Which demographic topics do you think are the subject of the most discussion nowadays and which, conversely, are the most overlooked?

As I already said, there are excessive concerns about demographic ageing. Fortunately, in this connection I have not yet seen our mass media using terms such as the new population bomb or demographic panic. A topic that is overlooked is the mortality of seniors. Leaving aside the Covid period, our life expectancy at age 65 is still short compared to the rest of Europe (North, South, West).

As well as geography, you have a degree in French, you were in France on a foreign internship at INED, and you are a recipient of an award from the French state. Do you also like traveling back to France privately?

I used to travel to France frequently for work, first to INED and more recently as a visiting professor at Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. I was there privately before that, visiting friends of my father, who was imprisoned with them in the Buchenwald-Dora concentration camp during World War II.

Many students never encounter demography during their studies at primary and secondary school (unlike other science subjects). Do you think that more attention should be paid to the basics of demography?

I believe that demography is becoming more important than it was in the past. For this reason I do think that more attention should be devoted to it in some subjects at secondary schools. Here, however, the problem is that every year new figures come out, new information is released, and demographic behaviour sometimes changes unexpectedly and

relatively fast, demographic projections to the year 2100 are being refined. It would probably be necessary for demographers to get involved and systematically prepare the resources and teaching materials for teachers.

You have completed a number of engagements abroad. Could any of them be considered pivotal?

The most important engagements for me were in Paris (INED and Sorbonne) and in the USA at the University of South Carolina. This may in part be because I was not there as a visiting student but as an employee who had to 'work' like everyone else, which, on the other hand, was beneficial for me and required a lot of responsibility.

There are a number of films and books (non-academic) in which the subject is a demographic process. Do you have a favourite film or book of this kind or, on the contrary, do you often avoid the lay perspectives of filmmakers and writers?

I remember one book by the very famous American writer Dan Brown, 'Inferno', which was published in 2013 and focused on the topic of overpopulation. In it the author talks not just about the problem of rapid population growth but also about the planet's other problems. Its subject of a viral pandemic caused by laboratory-produced viruses is interesting, but in this case it's a virus that limits fertility.

You also do a lot of teaching. Has there ever been a time when a student has startled you with a question or made you angry or laugh?

Students today are rather passive and sometimes it's necessary to push them into discussions.

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