Preface

The present issue of Folia Zoologica honours a tribute to mammalogy by Jan Zima at the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his birth. At the beginning of this year, when Miloš Macholán invited me to write a foreword, I realised that a quarter of a century has already passed since I met Jan (Honza to his friends) for the first time. It was in the ancient Karolinum of the Charles University, in the Old Town of Prague, when the invitation by Professor Vladimir Hanák to the 4th European Bat Conference introduced me to a group of young Czech mammalogists. Honza was one of them. We were all about the same age and I was accepted most friendly. Hardly any other single event was more fateful for my career than that visit to Prague in the summer of 1987. As a friend and a researcher, Honza deeply influenced my understanding of science and in many respects profoundly shaped my way of thinking. And I am convinced that I am not the only one among the mammalogists who feel this way.

Looking back over the past quarter of a century, I am astonished by the changes we have witnessed. When I met Honza, the world was globally polarised in the East and the West. Borders were impacted by this fact and travelling through the Iron Curtain was not a simple matter. We lived in a world without the internet, the geographic information system, PCR machines, posterior probability supports, statistical programmes, mobile phones and so forth. Even computers were rare, expensive and difficultly accessible. On the other hand, we were blessed by a world still richer in biodiversity than today. Many sites where we collected with Honza only two decades ago are now depleted and degraded, and the animals, so dear to us, have gone. Indeed, much has changed and we were occasionally unintended witnesses of great historical events.

I still remember like it was yesterday. In a chilly Tuesday morning of 28 November 1989, leaving Brno for the Prague airport, we have shaken hands with Honza in front of the Institute of Vertebrate Zoology (actually called at that time The Institute of Systematic and Ecological Biology). We were not fully aware that we shall never meet again in the communist Czechoslovakia. Back home that same evening I heard that the Czechoslovak Communist Party announced that it would relinquish power and dismantle the single party state. Thus, it happened that I experienced the final turbulent days of the velvet revolution as Honza’s guest. Europe was never the same again. A year and half later, in June 1991, Honza and Miloš Macholán (one of the editors of the present volume) accompanied me at a collecting trip to Mt Pelister on the Yugoslav-Greek border. Our target was the common shrew and indeed, that trip yielded material which enabled the description of a new chromosomal race, named after Pelister. We spent careless days and nights in an extensive forest of the endemic pine molika, until one of us switched on the radio in the car. It was a late morning of June 27 when we heard that hostilities erupted to Slovenia. It was the first day of armed conflict which brought down Yugoslavia at the end of the decade and whipped off many thousands of human lives. Our main concern was to return home as soon as possible. Next day, we reached Zagreb with not much trouble, but without our car. We split there, Honza and Miloš heading north, and I turned towards the west. But the main story of this foreword starts several decades earlier.

Honza was born on 14 August 1952 in Prague, in the Czech part of what was then still Czechoslovakia. In a way he was predestined for natural sciences. His father had a noteworthy research career in electronics and radio communications, and one of his grandfathers published extensively on hop production, an important topic in the country which is producing some of the world’s most famous brands of beer. The other grandfather, who was collecting butterflies and beetles, introduced Honza to natural history sciences and evidently influenced him most profoundly. I assume that Honza had a happy childhood since he is always remembering his family with warm gratitude.

In secondary school which he attended in Prague, Honza joined a naturalist club for youth, where he met Ivan Horáček and Jaroslav Červený. Similarly as Honza, Ivan and Jaroslav (Jarda) later on devoted their lives to science, primarily to mammalogy, and made respectful academic careers. The club regularly organised trips and summer expeditions throughout the former Czechoslovakia and numerous anecdotes originate from that period. After the initial interest in geology and speleology, Honza finally turned, under strong influence of...