

MILAN RYZL
1928–2011

By JOHN PALMER

On July 9, 2011, parapsychology lost another of its prominent researchers when Milan Ryzl passed away. A native Czech, Ryzl received his Ph.D. in natural sciences (physics and chemistry) from the University of

Prague. Having been associated with the Institute of Biology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, he left Czechoslovakia in 1967 for political reasons and established permanent residence in the United States. He was briefly on the staff of J. B. Rhine's Institute for Parapsychology in the 1960s, but his most extensive collaboration was with the eminent American parapsychologist J. G. Pratt (1973), who at the time was at the University of Virginia.

Ryzl was the author of more than 100 research papers and 20 books directly or indirectly related to parapsychology. His most prominent professional book is probably a textbook entitled *Parapsychology: A Scientific Approach* (Hawthorne, 1970). He traveled extensively, lecturing at numerous universities throughout the world. He also offered several parapsychology courses in the United States.

Ryzl is best known in the parapsychological community for his discovery and testing of a gifted research participant named Pavel Stepanek. Ryzl discovered Stepanek during a research program aimed at enhancing ESP ability by hypnosis. Over a 10-year period beginning in the 1960s, Stepanek's ESP ability was the subject of 27 reports of experiments conducted by 18 investigators, including Ryzl himself. Stepanek specialized in a particular type of forced-choice ESP test in which a thin card, white on one side and dark (usually green) on the other, was randomly placed white face up or down inside an opaque envelope. By touching the envelope, Stepanek could reliably guess the orientation of the card inside to a statistically significant degree. Later, it was discovered that Stepanek had a tendency to call particular envelopes green or white consistently. This "focusing effect" continued when the small envelopes were inserted in larger envelopes, making psi a viable explanation. This focusing soon supplanted the original simple effect as the focus of Stepanek's psi. In my opinion, the most important of Ryzl's papers on Stepanek had a more applied orientation (Ryzl, 1966). Briefly, Stepanek was asked to repeatedly guess (50 times or trials) the orientation of the card inside each of 10 envelopes, with the orientation randomly reassigned for each trial. By calculating the "majority vote" (green or white facing up) for each envelope, and converting the votes to a numeric code, Ryzl was able to correctly identify a three-digit target number, even though Stepanek's hit rate on individual targets was only (a still impressive) 60%.

Ryzl believed that all people have at least a little psi ability and it could be trained or developed. He also saw a link between religion and the physical sciences, and he believed that people could use their ESP to discover spiritual realities.

References

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