



**Dr. Mathias Kawalika**  
(17.07.1962-19.03.2006)

Twenty-two years ago, in summer 1984, a young man visited me in my office at the Biology Department, University of Zambia, Lusaka, introduced himself and informed me that I, as a fresh senior lecturer, was entitled to get a student assistant. I just have to submit an application to the registrar for funding to engage an assistant. I replied that at the time being I was so overwhelmed with bureaucracy, I faced in the first days and weeks of my stay in Zambia, that I did not think of preparing and submitting such an application in next time. Hours later, he came again, brought the application forms, and the only thing I had to do was to sign. Forms were already filled-in and I read for the first time the name (which I had missed at the first encounter) of this young man whom I wanted, according to the document, to be my assistant: Mr. Mathias Kawalika. A week later he has indeed become my student assistant, the first student assistant in my academic career. This was the beginning of a long lasting and continuous relationship, not just a teacher-student relation, but also research co-operation, and, above all, deep friendship.

I have been shocked to learn today, that Mathias passed yesterday after short suffering from a strong malarial attack. I still do not want to believe and accept that, yesterday, this period of nice fruitful relationship was ended - abruptly, suddenly, unexpectedly, untimely and cruelly.

Mentoring was reciprocal and not only Mathias was an attentive student but also my students and me have learned a lot from him. Whereas twenty-two years ago, virtually nothing has been known on Zambian mole-rats and scholars still described highly social giant mole-rats as "little known forms of reportedly solitary habitats", it has been thanks to Mathias that these animals dig the way to labs and to our minds, challenged and changed the hitherto scholarly opinions in many respects. Whereas twenty years ago Zambian mole-rats were known only from museum specimens, today a brief check in Google "Zambian mole-rats" OR "Zambian mole-rat" OR "Cryptomys anelli" OR "C. anelli" OR "Cryptomys mechowi" OR "C. mechowi" reveals 733 hits.

Numerous students in Germany, some in the Czech Republic and few also in other countries owe the interesting topics and subjects of their theses, and thus indirectly also their graduation and promotion to Zambian mole-rats and thus directly or indirectly also to Mathias. Many of them were lucky to learn him, his family and his hospitality personally. Many colleagues learned Mathias during scientific meetings in the Czech Republic, Belgium, France, Japan, and Tanzania. All of us liked his smile, optimism, humour, and charismatic character. Some of you met also his nice wife Doyen, and noticed that Mathias was also a real gentleman, attentive to ladies, carrying shopping bags, helping at home. He was hard working, there were times when he had two or three jobs at once, driving a taxi and/or working also in the field after office hours. We almost competed who will send the latest and the earliest email of the day. Not everyone knows that he actually has never been affiliated to a university, museum or a research institution. He was responsible for water and wastewater quality management within the city of Ndola, Luanshya and Masaiti towns. Zoological research on mole-rats in particular and rodents in general was his hobby. Still, he authored or co-authored 11 papers in peer reviewed journals and a book chapter (and several more will still come) and presented 13 contributions at international conferences. His many data and unique long-term continuous collections of owl pellets have still to be processed and evaluated. It is only slightly more than a year ago that Mathias defended his PhD at the University of Duisburg-Essen. He hoped that this would open him the door to an academic institution and thus give new possibilities to promote his hobby to a job. Particularly, in recent few weeks he has become restless, collecting and sending new data, materials and ideas. He had so many plans, so many dreams.... His family had great understanding for his research - and supported him. Doyen patiently shared home with caged mole-rats, fed them, made recordings. She and his children accompanied Mathias to the field or disassembled skilfully owl-pellets, cleaned and sorted bones...

Let me reproduce subjects of Mathias' last mails in my mailbox:

- 02. February 2006 "UNZA Agriculture application"
- 06. February 2006 "mole-rats in Kabwe"
- 12. February 2006 "Chilengwa burrow systematics"
- 15. February 2006 "Soil turn over"
- 17. February 2006 "Owl pellets sent off"
- 18. February 2006 "Eureka!"
- 25. February 2006 "Here is the ms"
- 27. February 2006 "New tasks and challenges"
- 14. March 2006 "I am suffering"

....

Let me still cite Mathias' reply to our best wishes to his birthday last year:

*"All in all I am happy that I have been privileged to at least clock 43. It is no mean achievement here in Africa where death is more normal than being alive. No single day passes without someone close or in the neighbourhood has passed on."*

Mathias Kawalika has lived only slightly longer than Zambian average. However, he lived a full life and in all respects and according to all standards significantly above - not only Zambian - average.

Mathias is survived by his wife Doyen, seven children Enid, Clara, Jean, Henry, Margaret, Mirriam and Luwin (his first wife, Diana, died of systemic erythematoses lupus, a disease which can be kept under control in developed countries, and had left him with five children, whom Doyen has become new loving and beloved mom), and his father, Mr. Henry Chimpumba Kawalika (80), and an extended family, to which he was a great support.

My family and my colleagues, we all will miss him, and we all are grateful that he was here and shared his shining smile, warmth and wisdom with us.

May His Soul Rest In Peace.

Hynek Burda