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In Memoriam: Professor James W. Vaupel



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James Vaupel—Jim to his friends—left us at 1.30 pm on March 27, 2022. The news of his death left the whole community of demographers stunned. Jim was for all of us a scientific reference point, and so much more. His passing—before he had even reached the age of eighty—seems strangely inconsonant with his position as a researcher on questions to do with longevity and the ageing of populations. His model of longevity is presented in every school of demography in the world: a model that was illustrated by the author with great optimism, to the point of convincing the reader that new milestones in the increase of human survival are not only possible, but certainly achievable. Without a doubt his demise is seen by all of us as a cruel joke, and certainly by himself as a premature death.

Tracing a complete picture of the scientific status of Jim Vaupel would mean filling many pages and being, in any case, certain that one had forgotten something important. Even his C.V. that is to be found on web pages states the main stages in his career, the numerous honours he received, and the hundreds of publications, but neglects to record his extensive activity as an organizer of international conferences and meetings, and his extraordinary commitment in training the legions of demographers of the present century.

Let it be recalled that Jim Vaupel, member of the German Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, regular Scientific Member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, and Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, was Founding Director and Emeritus Director of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research of Rostock (MPIDR), an institute that he directed from 1996 to 2017, when he retired. From 2013 to 2017 he also directed the Max-Planck Odense Centre on the Biodemography of Aging in Denmark, which he had founded before leaving Rostock. He was still as busy as ever, both as Professor of Social Sciences, of Health Sciences and of Natural Sciences at the University of Southern Denmark a few days before his death, and as a researcher at the Max-Planck Odense Centre, where, surrounded by colleagues and many post-docs, Italian too, he continued his studies with the same enthusiasm as always.

As is well-known, he was an all-round researcher. His research work ranged from demographics to mathematics and statistics, from the social sciences to economics and politics, from biology to anthropology and genetics. His numerous articles were published in the most prestigious international journals of all the human and social sciences. We need only recall, as he did in his C.V. such fundamental writings as the articles in

Nature, “Biodemography of human ageing” and “Diversity of Ageing across the Tree of Life”, and the article in *Science*, “Getting to the root of aging”.

Graziella’s memories

In a few years, his dynamism made it natural for him to be chosen to direct the Max Planck (MPIDR), which, under his guidance, became one of the main European and world demographic centres. He summoned young researchers from every continent, though in the early years it was mainly Italian researchers—many of them sent by me—who arrived in the institute. In that period Italian was the language most spoken—and heard—in the corridors of its first seat.

Our relation as scientific collaborators, together with mutual admiration and friendship, also led me to spend longer or shorter periods at Rostock. It was on my first visit, in the old seat of the Institute, that, while complimenting him on how he was organizing the scientific research, I said, on the spur of the moment, that I thought the Institute could also take on the task of training. He seized on my suggestion with his usual enthusiasm. I seem to see him now as he said, “Graziella, why don’t we organize a European doctorate in demography together?” With the usual supersonic speed he brought to any new adventure, Jim planned the project of the European Doctoral School of Demography (EDSD). It is a doctorate that is still going strong now, involving all the European schools of demography, and had a great role in training the “millennials” of Italian and European demography, and not only them.

I met Jim in the early 1980s. It was Nathan Keyfitz who introduced us. Those were the years when Keyfitz was in Vienna as Director of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis at Laxenburg (IIASA) and Jim was there as a Research Scholar along with Anatoli Yashin. I was a researcher at the *Istituto di Demografia* in Rome and had met Keyfitz during one of his study trips at my Institute. I remember that one day Keyfitz called me from Laxenburg to invite me to spend a study week at the IIASA. There were two researchers there, excellent mathematicians and statisticians, but “not much as demographers” as Keyfitz put it, and they could work with me on a very interesting project. With the help of a specialist, Jim and Anatoli had prepared the so-called “surfaces” for a three-dimensional reading of demographic phenomena, which were extremely useful for describing through images the development of a phenomenon in its three components of “age, period and cohort”. Keyfitz knew my studies on mortality and knew that I had a long series of Italian life tables (from 1861 to 1980) for men and women. These data were used to construct the first “mortality surfaces” in modern demographic history. Thus began a collaboration that was to last a lifetime. We published our first article in *Genus* as early as 1985. Others were to follow in following decades. In the early years of this century Jim and I collaborated on an interesting research project on Sardinian centenarians, publishing various articles together.

But the initial experience remains with me in the story of our friendship. It was undertaken with great enthusiasm after my trip to Vienna followed by Jim’s and Anatoli’s trip to Rome. They arrived early one morning on the Vienna–Rome train. I was waiting for them at the station. They had slept badly on the train and were somnolent, so I took them straight to their hotel. After a few hours they appeared in the Institute, ready for work. The amusing episode I want to tell you concerns Jim. He was a great drinker of

“American coffee”, which obviously was not to be found in Rome, nor—equally obviously—at Via Nomentana, the seat of the Institute. Close to our centre was a small bar that made an excellent “*caffè italiano ristretto*”, and so I suggested we take a small break to taste it. Jim eyed with surprise the cup the barman placed in front of him as it contained just a sliver of coffee. He exclaimed that he was used to drinking a full cup! As it was impossible in an Italian bar to have what he was asking for, he decided to order another. This was repeated during the two following breaks during the day, at lunchtime and mid-afternoon. Next morning, Jim arrived in the Institute, still hyper-excited after spending a sleepless night: six Italian coffees had played a nasty trick on him, and from then on it would clearly be sensible to reduce the doses. We often recalled this episode and every time we laughed over it. I’d like to think, dear Jim, that you can still remember it and smile with me.

Elisabetta’s memories

“I was a statistician too but then I moved up to Demography”. That’s what Jim answered to Francesco Lagona, an Italian statistician (and my future husband), when I introduced them in 1998. Yes, Jim was a Demographer, an extraordinary, keen one. He had multidisciplinary interests in biodemography and mathematical demography. He also studied the policy implications of current demographic trends of low fertility, high immigration, and longer lives. To all these fields, he gave major contributions during his intense career. Jim had ideas and the ability to make them happen.

I met Jim in early 1998 when I arrived in Rostock, sent by my supervisor Graziella Caselli. I was not excited to spend the last year of my PhD in an ex-DDR, unknown village in the North of Germany. I wanted to go to the US, but Graziella had already decided that I would be her first Italian contact with the newly born Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. The first impact was certainly not exciting for me, so much so that Jim wrote to Graziella that he was happy to have me in his research group but that he wasn’t sure if I was as happy to be there. Today I can say how fortunate was Graziella’s decision! Jim was a great Maestro. He paid close attention to students and junior researchers to whom he used to say “I’m your boss, but when it comes to science, we argue peers to peers”. After my PhD, I came back to Rostock as post-doc and then as research scientist. I had the privilege of experiencing the growth of the Institute, of seeing the birth of many important initiatives: the International Max Planck Research School, the open-access journal *Demographic Research*, the European Doctoral School of Demography, the Human Mortality Database, the International Longevity Database, the Springer Series *Demographic Research Monographs*, just to mention the most significant ones; an extraordinarily formative period to my career for which I have a deep feeling of gratitude towards Jim. It was also a very pleasant time for Francesco and me and we both ended up loving the city of Rostock, which always intrigued Jim who couldn’t understand how we could prefer Rostock to Rome. Amused by our stories, he often proudly told our positive experience to Max Planck’s international guests. When in 2005 I became associate professor in Messina (Italy), it was very hard for me to leave the Max Planck Institute. Jim understood my strong regret thus, from then until 2017, when he retired under the German law, he arranged that I could permanently keep the Max Planck account (a rare privilege!) and generously invited me every summer to spend a

research period at the Institute. We have been in contact until few weeks ago when, with his usual enthusiasm, he accepted my unfortunately belated invitation to write an article for *Genus*.

Over the years, I have had many opportunities to enjoy Jim's company. Jim was a bright, sociable and communicative person. He enjoyed the company of friends and colleagues. I have sat many times at his same dining table. He liked refined food and good wine, overall he loved porcini mushrooms and fish. And he loved to have dinner in front of the sea. I still remember how much he enjoyed those fabulous moonlit dinners in the Bay of Mazzarò in Taormina (Sicily) on the occasion of a workshop on supercentenarians. Ciao Jim!

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