



FOLLOWING THE RED CRABS

DECATHLETE, GYMNAST, BOXER AND ATHLETE. THIS COMBINATION OF FOUR STRONG PERSONALITIES HAS PROVEN TO BE EXTREMELY EFFECTIVE IN THE CZECH PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY HEATON. IN THEIR VERY FIRST JOINT INTERVIEW, THE FRIČ FAMILY – PARENTS AND CHILDREN – TALK ABOUT HOW THEY FIND HARMONY AND SLOWLY BUT SURELY DRIVE THEIR FAMILY BUSINESS TOWARDS A BILLION-CZK TURNOVER.

By Aneta Šaferová, Photo: Jan Berounský

At the end of November, one of the most astonishing natural spectacles on the planet unfolds on Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean. The red land crab, which inhabits only this Australian territory, leaves its forest burrows and heads to the coast to lay eggs into the sea. The sheer number of these ruby-colored crabs – a dense carpet of forty million adults – covers the ground for days, halts traffic, and draws visitors to witness this bizarre phenomenon. Two years ago, Jaromír and Jaroslava Frič also traveled to witness this natural wonder – and the long journey turned out to be life-changing, both personally and in business.

“We stayed on the remote side of the island in a protected reserve, where there wasn’t a soul – except for countless crabs. I told my wife that on our way back we needed to stop somewhere more lively. So we headed to Singapore,” recounts Jaromír Frič Sr., sitting in the modern offices of Heaton in Prague’s Pankrác district. Coincidentally, he had just returned from another trip to the Southeast Asian city-state a few days prior.

“Back then, in November, Singapore absolutely charmed us. The weather was perfect, twenty-eight degrees, we walked along the vibrant waterfront lined with restaurants offering cuisines from all over the world. And then we spotted the Pilsner Urquell logo. Curious, we sat down, and soon they brought us a perfectly poured frothy Pilsner in a classic pint glass. I took a sip and said: ‘Jaruška, I like it here. We need to figure something out so we can start coming here on business trips,’” Frič recalls

with a smile. “Immediately, I started texting the team back at the office: ‘Watch out, he’s got another idea!’” laughs his wife Jaroslava – a slender, energetic woman who, even in her seventies, continues exploring new frontiers alongside her husband.

In just a year and a half, they managed to open a branch in Singapore. A few weeks ago, the first shipment of goods arrived there – specifically, Gynella products for women’s health developed by Heaton, which are already in demand in Southeast Asia, as previous experience in Vietnam has shown. But let’s start from the beginning.

To expand branches, a stable parent business is essential. The Frič family founded Heaton twenty-three years ago, initially focusing on managing drug registration procedures for other companies before starting to sell pharmaceutical products themselves. Today, they hold over a hundred marketing authorizations for prescription drugs across Europe. Their focus includes gynecology, urology, nephrology, oncology, diabetology, and antibiotics. They also manufacture their own line of women’s healthcare products under the Gynella brand, which provide relief from vaginal infections, urinary tract issues, support intimate hygiene, and help during pregnancy, postpartum recovery, or menopause.

The company has branches in Germany, Slovakia, Romania, and most recently, Singapore. It also sells licensed medications to many other countries. Last year, they had an exceptional year. Among other things, thanks to the launch of a new type of antibiotic, which was not available on the Czech market before, the turnover increased by a third to 425 million CZK and EBITDA profitability exceeded 100 million CZK.

“That was our long-term goal, and we managed to achieve it. And once one goal is achieved, another must immediately be set. The next one is reaching a one-billion-crown turnover within the next five years,” reveals the charismatic Jaromír Frič – an athlete through and through, who keeps himself in remarkable shape at seventy-two through regular training.

In fact, it was sport that first brought him and his wife together. They met in the 1970s while studying in Prague – he had come to the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport from Hradec Králové, and she from Přeštice near Plzeň. He was a successful decathlete who even competed at the European Championships, and she was involved in modern gymnastics. Later, Jaromír also studied medicine and, after passing his board exams, worked as an internist and sports physician. But after the Velvet Revolution, he transitioned from medicine into the pharmaceutical industry.

“At that time, international companies were opening branches in the Czech Republic, and their sales reps were earning three times more than doctors. Luckily, it’s the other way around today, but back then it was a very lucrative job,” he recalls of the year 1993, when he became a representative for the pharmaceutical division of Knoll, part of the German conglomerate BASF. After just six months of visiting clinics and promoting the company’s products, he was promoted – and recommended his wife to take over his position.

“I was basically her boss all her life. Nowadays, it wouldn’t be acceptable to have two family members in the same team at such a large company. And she was always the most talented, which some people may have seen as favoritism. But in truth, it was all due to her honest hard work,” says the man who eventually rose to the corporate ranks of Knoll’s German headquarters, where he was responsible for sales strategies across all the countries the company operated in. His wife stayed in the sales position for eight years.

“I would say that having a medical education can actually be a bit of a disadvantage in this field.”

“When a doctor sees another doctor coming, ego always plays a role. I had a humanities background, so I had to learn a lot, but I was good at building partnerships with doctors. It was my duty to present medications properly, but they held final responsibility for prescribing them,” reflects Jaroslava Fričová. At the turn of the millennium, she decided to leave her stressful, result-oriented sales job behind. Her husband had already left Knoll and later worked for the Czech pharmaceutical company Lachema – which was acquired by Croatia’s Pliva during his tenure – and eventually became Sales Director at VUAB Pharma in Roztoky near Prague.

“Sales and manufacturing were completely different worlds. I remember my wife laughing and buying me a flat cap and a tin coffee canister when I started working in a factory,” he says, hinting at the couple’s lifelong humor and harmony.

At that time, Jaroslava began working independently and launched the joint-stock company Heaton, initially focused on drug registration procedures and leasing sales reps. Interestingly, the name “Heaton” was more a matter of convenience – to avoid the bureaucracy of setting up a company, the Frič family bought an already existing “empty” firm and kept the name. Four years later, Jaromír joined Jaroslava in the business. That’s when they registered their first medication – a type of contraceptive whose patent had just expired and was available for the Czech market.

“This was our entry into gynecology, and things moved quickly from there. The beginnings were tough – we didn’t have huge capital. Whatever we earned, we reinvested in inventory. That’s still how we operate today. We’ve never taken a bank loan or outside investment. We grow organically, gradually. We’re old-school in that regard,” explains Jaromír, who not only shares a sense of humor with his wife, but also a complementary personality.

“I lean toward fast decisions, constantly coming up with ideas, relying on numbers – but my empathy level is very low. My wife, on the other hand, is an emotional anchor, deeply empathetic. So when someone wants to say something to me, they go to her first, and she relays it in a tactful way. We complement each other, we don’t compete, we don’t get in each other’s way. And I think we haven’t made any truly bad decisions so far.”

IN THE SPORTING SPIRIT

Many decisions were required along their business journey – one of the biggest was succession planning. When Jaromír and Jaroslava were preparing to retire, they were ready to sell the company. The process would likely have been swift – Czech privately owned pharmaceutical firms are rare, and multinational corporations are constantly circling, eager to expand.

But when they told their two children, daughter Natálie and son Jaromír Jr., they were surprised: both said they wanted to continue the family business – even though their previous careers had been in completely different industries.

Jaromír Jr. studied IT at the Czech Technical University in Prague and then spent ten years as a software architect at McKinsey & Company, eventually leading a forty-person international team. “Corporate experience was an incredible school of management. You learn a lot about people from different cultures,” says the 46-year-old, who also founded his own business. While still working at McKinsey, he co-founded E-Reading, an e-book company responding to the then-booming market.

“We bought e-readers in China and had a Czech programmer configure them so they could receive purchased books online – just like Amazon’s Kindle. Then we approached publishers and acquired

interesting titles. From the start, we built the company with the goal of selling it – which happened when Albatros Media bought us,” Jaromír Jr. says of the multimillion-crown transaction.

Jaromír’s four-year younger sister Natálie, now married and going by Kazíková, had been drawn to the wider world since her student days. While studying at the College of Hotel Management and Economics, she worked as a waitress and bartender in Ireland. Later, she ventured even farther – to Australia and New Zealand – where she worked in cafés and at catering events.



“It was in the land Down Under that I learned how to take care of myself. It was a big life lesson. Back then, we didn’t have today’s technology. If you wanted to call home on Skype, you had to go to an internet café. But it gave me a lot,” recalls the tall, energetic woman who, after returning to the Czech Republic, held marketing and sales roles in various companies. She also got married and had two children. Joining the family company eventually felt natural.

“Because I come from a family of owners, I’ll always go the extra mile for the company. I have a different relationship to it than an average employee. I deeply respect my parents for what they built, and I appreciate that they don’t try to interfere. They’re still my role models, and I’m always happy to ask them for advice,” says Natálie Kazíková, who took over as CEO after her parents stepped down. She is now responsible for short-term goals, identifying new business opportunities, and expanding the product portfolio. Her passion project is the Gynella women’s health line, which she helped develop and which dominates the company’s exports.

Her brother Jaromír, in his role as General Director, focuses on long-term strategy and vision.

“Carrying on our parents’ life’s work means a great deal to me. I see it as an honorable duty and a way of building a family legacy we may one day pass on to our own children,” he says.

The siblings have very different personalities – she is the extrovert, he the introvert – but they complement each other well in company leadership. What unites them is their shared business drive,

a focus on goals, and a love of sports. Both were athletes in their youth – Natálie focused on track and field, Jaromír played football and later fell in love with boxing.

“I think having a sporting mindset is crucial in business. If you want to win a match or hit a target, you have to train – and it’s the same with business. While I tend to take a strategic, long-term view, my sister is incredibly strong in operational execution,” says Jaromír Jr., reflecting on their dynamic.

Before the siblings fully took over Heaton eight years ago, the company hired an external German manager for a transitional five-year period. This gave both siblings the chance to familiarize themselves with the specifics of the pharmaceutical industry and gradually step into their new roles.

The parents remain the company’s official owners. The sole shareholder of Heaton has always been their mother, Jaroslava Fričová. Did they ever consider sharing ownership equally between both parents? “It’s a historical arrangement. We won’t be changing it,” says Jaromír Sr. Their children, however, have clearly defined roles. “We’re employees with specific goals to achieve,” adds Natálie Kazíková.

A MEXICAN INTERMEZZO

Today, mother Jaroslava checks in from a distance – she visits the office once a week, handles some administration, and helps her daughter Natálie by looking after her grandchildren. Father Jaromír is focused on two major projects: expanding the business into Singapore and investing in pharmaceutical development – a long-held dream where he can put his medical expertise to good use.

Three years ago, Heaton embarked on developing a treatment for sarcopenia – a condition involving the loss of muscle mass, often experienced during long-term immobility. There is currently no cure for it.

“Our company is a continuous series of fortunate coincidences,” says Jaromír Sr. “One day I was at home reading a magazine article on longevity, which mentioned a molecule that could help with this issue. But no one in the world was producing it for human use.” That sparked a collaboration with a specialized biotech lab in Lithuania, into which Heaton has since invested tens of millions of crowns.

“Any research is a costly, long-term endeavor with uncertain outcomes. It can end at any moment. But I’m fully convinced of its potential. The preclinical results are very encouraging. We’ll see what the next testing phases reveal,” he says, looking ahead. Still, he doesn’t dare to predict when the medicine might become available to patients. “Of course, I’m mainly developing it for myself – so I can keep doing sports,” laughs the man who, not long ago, still competed in veteran decathlons. As a doctor, he also personally handles Heaton’s 24/7 pharmacovigilance hotline, where doctors and patients can report side effects. “Thankfully, it doesn’t ring that often.”

The current expansion into Singapore – known for its dynamic economy and leadership in pharmaceutical innovation and healthcare – is a major challenge for the Frič family. One thing that struck them during the branch setup was how fully digitized the entire administrative process was. Heaton now runs its own e-shop in Singapore, where women can directly order Gynella products, and they are working to boost interest among doctors.

In local medical culture, it’s common for prescription drugs to be sold directly in clinics. Jaromír Sr. personally visits interested practices, with support from a specialized agency. “The doctors there are very well-informed – many of them studied in the UK or Australia,” he says with admiration.

His daughter Natálie is counting on this move to open doors to the broader region. “Singapore sets the tone for other Asian markets – it’s a kind of hub. That’s why we’re registering our products there – it will make entry into other countries easier, we are already processing registration in neighboring Malaysia.” explains Kazíková.

The company had previously started exporting to Vietnam, where demand for Gynella Natal Ferti Gel – a product for couples trying to conceive – was strong. “Every week, Vietnamese companies contacted us requesting more stock. They’re very interested in European products, which, although more expensive than Chinese or Indian competitors, are seen as higher quality. Asia holds an enormous commercial potential for us. These are massive markets – numbers you can’t even imagine in Europe.” Kazíková notes. Still, they’re not neglecting expansion within Europe either - this year, they also plan to open another major European market.



But the Czech Republic remains key to the company – it still generates half of Heaton’s revenue. Hormonal contraception remains an important part of the portfolio, even though more and more young women are opting for non-hormonal alternatives. “It’s a sensitive topic for us. The market declined for quite a while and is still dropping a bit, but it’s no longer so dramatic. Every form of contraception has its pros and cons. There are lots of factors at play. For example, I grew up on hormonal contraception, had two healthy children, and got pregnant exactly when I wanted. I think the market will stabilize and contraception will continue to find users who see its benefits,” says Kazíková, describing a segment in which Heaton is the second or third largest player in the Czech market.

Inside the company, she and her brother work to maintain a family-like atmosphere, which they consider essential. “We build on the values our parents taught us. Everyone who works here can trust us. Transparency is key. Mistakes happen – but if they’re not addressed, they grow. The

important thing is to talk about problems and proactively find solutions and ways to move forward,” explains Kazíková, noting that while everyone at the company has clearly defined roles, there’s no strict hierarchy – anyone can talk to anyone directly.

She attributes last year’s record-breaking 31% revenue growth not only to the launch of new products and international expansion, but primarily to the great work of Heaton’s sixty employees. To share in this success, the leadership took the whole team on a week-long company retreat to Cancún, Mexico, this March. “You need to know how to reward yourself, not just work,” says Natálie Kazíková, who adds that rapid growth brings with it some challenges – particularly when it comes to having the right processes in place to handle it.

Heaton also stands out from other pharmaceutical companies with its very relaxed inventory policy. “We keep a large stock on hand – which would never be allowed in a large corporation because it’s financially inefficient. But we can afford it, and it gives the company more stability. When competitors experience shortages, we can step in immediately. We want to be a reliable and responsible partner,” says Jaromír Jr.

He also notes that despite numerous offers, Heaton is definitely not for sale. “Selling would only bring the headache of figuring out what to do with all that money. We find fulfillment in building the company – and we enjoy working together.”

The family’s alignment in leadership and direction is built on mutual respect. “We don’t always have the same opinion – and that’s a good thing. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to complement each other or grow. It’s all about discussion, trust, and respect – within the family and in all functional relationships,” reflects Natálie Kazíková.

They say they’re able to separate work and personal life quite well. When they gather for Sunday lunch, business only rarely enters the conversation. “Of course, we all live and breathe it – but it wouldn’t be fair to our partners and kids, who don’t have the same insight into the company,” her brother adds.

Both siblings draw energy for leading the company through – unsurprisingly – sports, which they practice most often in the early morning. Natálie goes running or to the gym several times a week. “That early hour is truly mine – there are no kids around, no one asking me for anything. I’m surrounded by a fog, I don’t perceive anyone else, and I reflect on my own thoughts. I also enjoy solitude during my daily commute from Plzeň, where we live, to the office in Prague. I call friends, sing to myself, or listen to audiobooks in German,” smiles Natálie Kazíková, who also devotes time to art. She enjoys painting landscapes following YouTube tutorials by American painter and teacher Bob Ross. In the hallway of Heaton’s offices hangs an abstract blue-toned painting created by employees during a team-building event at the Convent of St. Agnes.

“Every Christmas, we also give our people handmade gifts. Last year, Mom knitted warm socks, and I made sixty bowls on a pottery wheel. They were crooked – but made from the heart. That’s how we have fun at Heaton.”