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Muzur, Amir

Source / Izvornik: **Orvostörténeti közlemények, 2003, 48, 127 - 132**

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:184:348685>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-02-11**



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HUNGARIAN DOCTORS AND THE “GOLDEN AGE” (1884-1914) OF OPATIJA (CROATIA)

AMIR MUZUR

Opatija (Abbazia) has primarily been (or, at least, has been considered as such) an Austrian miracle. The building of *Crikvenica* in 1888, advocated by the Graz naturalist *Johannes Frischauf*,¹ was supposed to launch a Hungarian counterpart to the Austrian Opatija. In spite of abundant support by the Hungarian part of the Monarchy, however, (carried out by the Hungarian Government of Rijeka, personally by the Croat Ban *Khuen-Héderváry*), the project chronically was tagging after its Austrian model. *Friedrich Schüler*, the director-general of the Viennese *Südbahngesellschaft*, was investing enormous sums into the development of Opatija, the aristocratic circles were spreading the voice about the romantic Adriatic oasis, and, finally, Professor *Julius Glax*, the famous balneologist, put the new *Kurort* on its feet.

Glax, however, was not at all the first foreign physician with a private practice in Opatija: the primacy belongs to the Hungarian *Albert Szemere*. Born in a Jewish family in 1846 in Gyoma, he graduated in Vienna in 1871, and arrived to Opatija in 1884, a year after he had changed his original family name, *Steiner*.² As a specialist for “*the diseases of the chest, the throat, and the nerves*” (according to another source, he was also a gynecologist), he was to live and receive patients in *Villa Szemere* (or *Villa Paola*, named after his wife; present address V. C. Emina 5), whereas for summers he kept his earlier practice at Karlovy Vary (now in the Czech Republic). Szemere supported the rénomé of both health resorts — i.e. Opatija and Karlovy Vary — by writing propagandistic popular-scientific monographs on them. Otherwise, he was not especially active in Opatija’s public and medical life and, in the same way he had entered into it, he silently disappeared from here after the Great War (he died in 1922, waiting for the Italian citizenship).³ It seems that he was planning to leave as early as 1908, since in that year, he put his Villa on sale to the Health-Resort Committee (*Kurkommission*): his offer might have been declined due to high price he was requiring for: half a million Austrian crowns. A certain *Sándor Szemere*, who was probably Albert Szemere’s descendant, was to become the director-general of the Rijeka oil refinery

¹ Cf. Matejčić, Radmila. "Podaci o razvoju Crikvenice u klimatsko i lječilišno-kupališno mjesto zabilježeni u riječkom tisku." In: *Ars Aesculapii: Prilozi za povijest zdravstvene kulture Rijeke i Hrvatskog primorja* [Ars Aesculapii: Contributions to the history of sanitary culture of Rijeka and Croatian Littoral], edited by Radmila Matejčić and Marijan Matejčić, 185-95. Rijeka: ICR, 1982.

² Szinnyei, József, ed. *Magyar írók élete és munkái*. Bp., Hornyánszky, 1909.

³ *Državni arhiv Rijeka* (DAR) [Rijeka State Archives]. JU-8, box 74.

(at that time called ROMSA - *Raffineria Olii Minerali Società Anonima*) during the interwar period.

In order to start implementing the *thalassotherapeutic* principles promoted by Julius Glax, adequate housing- and medical institutions were needed. The first sanatorium of this kind was erected upon the hill in the Slatina district by doctor *Ignaz Schwarz*, who probably came also from Hungary, and named *Quisisana* (Italian: 'One-Recovers-Here'). The later owner of the sanatorium was *Franz Kirsch*,⁴ and after the Second World War the building would become a Workers' Vacation Centre *Otokar Keršovani*, and finally, after building an additional wing, the Hotel *Opatija*. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Bavarian Professor *Max Joseph Örtel* arranged a system of walking paths in the park of the *Quisisana* sanatorium, intended for a precisely-dosed and gradual physical burdening of the six categories of coronary patients and rehabilitants.

By the mid-1890s, Schwarz retired, but was decently "replaced" by new Hungarians — *Márton Szigeti*, *Lajos Ambrószy*, and *Miklós Szontágh*.⁵ While Ambrószy and Szontágh left Opatija after serving only for a few years, Márton Szigeti decided to combine his practice in Opatija with a summer practice in Gleichenberg (Styria). One should be reminded that, according to the Opatija tourism logic of the time, summer was the least attractive season. In the beginning, Szigeti lived and worked in *Villa Stella* (present address M. Tita 101), later in Hotel *Bristol* (today: *Palme*), and Pension *Hausner* (the northern part of the present *Millennium*). Except of a booklet on Gleichenberg in 1893 he never published on his experiences in Opatija.⁶ He advertised himself as a specialist for nose-, throat-, and chest diseases (and afterwards also as a cardiologist). He was receiving patients, like most of Opatija's physicians, one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon. Like in the case of his colleague Szemere, he disappeared from the Opatija medical scene after the First World War.

The first sanatorium in Opatija after Schwarz's *Quisisana* (if one does not count the Officers' Sanatorium in Slatina) was opened in the mid-1890s by *Kálmán Szegő*, who was born in Eger in 1863, and married to *Helene Holländer*. The *Szegő Sanatorium* disposed of four buildings: a sanatorium for adults (the main building, with 50 rooms and hydrotherapeutic devices); a children sanatorium (30 rooms); a building with doctors' offices, x-ray apparatus, laboratory, and a playing room and a gymnastic hall with a sunbathing terrace. Altogether 80 rooms, 150 beds, central heating, library, swimming beach, winter garden, park, dining room arranged as a cave pit, modern medical procedures. Children could enjoy the outdoor playground, and at request, classes were also organized for them. If they were aged above seven, they could have been admitted without an escort: parents were receiving weekly reports and a guarantee of a constant supervision.⁷ As an experienced paediatrician and paedopsychologist, however, Szegő did not allow children to read daily press and fiction, since allegedly, children would become premature. They were

⁴ Glax, Julius. *Abbazia: Ein Führer für Curgäste*. Abbazia: Prof. Dr. Julius Glax, 1901.

⁵ *Curort & Seebad Abbazia*. Abbazia: Direction der Curanstalten der k.k. Südbahn-Gesellschaft, 1895.

⁶ Gulyás, Pál, ed. *Magyar írók élete és munkái*. Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó / Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Könyvtára, 1992.

⁷ Szegő, Kálmán. *Maison de santé et établissement hydrotherapique pour adultes et enfants - Abbazia (Autriche)*. Abbazia: Dr. Koloman Szegő, 1909.

not allowed to expose their opinion without being asked for it by the elder, and neither to discuss vividly any topic. Szegő was publishing papers in a broad thematic range, from scrofulosis, convulsive cough, and children education to the policy of building up sanatoria in Hungarian Littoral. As a devoted patriot, he engaged himself in the war efforts and offered free accommodation in his sanatorium to 12 Austrian and 5 German recovering army officers. After the war, he acquired the new, Italian citizenship, but maintained the old, Austrian-Hungarian one.⁸ Until 1924, he continued to direct the sanatorium which first was renamed *Casa di cura Abbazia*, and later, at the beginning of the 1930s, was transformed into an “ordinary” hotel, *Grande albergo Belvedere* (which name the institution is still nominated): before this occurred, however, the old Szegő had moved to the other world, by his own will.

Hungarians used Opatija also as a test range for their new patents. If anyone has ever found “warm water,” then this was the Opatija physician *Géza Fodor* (born in Pest in 1867, graduated at Medical Faculty in 1889). After several years at various German and Austrian clinics, this doctor’s child became an assistant to Professor *Frigyes Korányi*, an assistant-professor at Pest University (lecturing mainly on blood- and metabolism diseases), a consultant to the Hungarian State Railways and the Hungarian Royal Mail, and then arrived to Opatija. Fodor published in at least six journals and three languages, lived in *Villa Fodor* (also known as *Villa Camilla*, M. Tita 84). He was the vice-president of the Opatija Medical Association⁹ and the president-founder of the *Aquarius* society (founded about 1884, the *Aquarium Verein Abbazia* aimed to explore maritime flora and fauna, and to that scope build an aquarium in 1911, next to the present hotel *Imperial*).¹⁰ According to local history, however, Fodor first of all entered Opatija society by preparing a commercial cocktail of an attractive name —*Marina*, actually, simply a filtered, sterilised, and CO₂-impregnated sea water. An entire philosophical-medical library was written about how to drink that water: how it should be treated, diluted, added to milk with a spoon; for how long it should be consumed, whether before or after a meal; how it works at diarrhea when it is taken warm, or, in other cases, at room temperature; how it is especially efficient at diabetes and tuberculosis, etc. In the summertime, an office was waiting for Dr. Géza Fodor in Stoosz, Hungary, while his trace ends in Opatija around the Great War: he would be working in Zagreb, as a State Railways Direction physician, until his death in 1927.¹¹

Another elixir was launched by yet another Hungarian, the pharmacist *Béla Erényi*, born in 1872 in Nagyvárad (presently Oradea in Rumania). Erényi graduated in 1893 in Budapest, acquired there his own pharmacy, hired it out and invested into a new pharmacy. He worked in the Trenčín (Trencsén) bath (now Slovakia), arrived to Opatija after the First World War and opened a pharmacy there at hotel *Residenz*. He named his medicinal brandy *Diana Franzbranntwein*, after the name of the pharmacy in Pest he had once worked in. Béla Erényi died in Budapest in 1935.¹²

⁸ DAR [Rijeka State Archives]. JU-8, box 74.

⁹ Szinnyei: *o.c.*

¹⁰ De Canziani Jakšić, Theodor. *Povijest akvarija u Rijeci i Opatiji* [A history of the aquaria in Rijeka and Opatija]. Rijeka: Prirodoslovni muzej Rijeka / Državni arhiv u Rijeci, 2002/2003, 9.

¹¹ Fried, K. “Staleške vijesti,” *Liječnički vjesnik* 48, no. 6 (1927) 207.

¹² Gulyás: *o.c.*

According to a hypothetical order of stepping onto the "local scene," the next would be *Julius Mahler*, a Dresden gynecologist and cardiologist, who lived in Opatija's *Villa Ježica* while, during summer, practiced in Hungarian Buzias. He was, nevertheless, no one else but *Gyula Mahler*, the son of the Jewish couple *Dezső Mahler* and *Róza Krause* from Földvár, Hungary, born in 1870 and later married to the Viennese *Klara Eckel*. Mahler opened his 60-bed sanatorium in the district called Dražica, having had estimated the local climate mild enough to enable the patients dwelling in the open air also during the major part of winter. In addition, Mahler considered the highly relative air humidity, combined a high stable air pressure, good conditions for coronary patients' rehabilitation (but he was accepting also neurotics, diabetics, and others). When Mahler died in 1923,¹³ after having had finally obtained the Italian citizenship, the sanatorium was inherited by his wife, Klara, while the medical management was taken over by Dr. Luciano Chiandussi. In the 1930s, the sanatorium *Dr. Mahler* changed its owner once again, but this time it was also renamed as *Casa di cura Dott. Horvat*¹⁴ (presently Hotel Royal).

Doctor *Julius (Gyula) Winkler* (born in 1871, in Somkerch), a son of the Hungarian *Béla Winkler* and *Rosa Marković*, worked in Opatija between 1902 and 1914, first as a specialist for the diseases of women, chest, and skin, and later as a dentist. At summers he was seeing patients in Bálványosfürdő.¹⁵ Taking refuge in Budapest in 1914, he came back to Opatija in 1923.

A few Hungarian physicians "walked through" Opatija without leaving any significant trace behind. Similarly to the case of Mahler, Buzias was the original practicing place for *Rudolf Sugár*, who worked in Opatija at *Villa Nada*. Doctor *Rosenberg* came to Opatija as a Pest Printers' Trade Union physician, and practiced in *Villa Guttenberg* (later sanatorium *Adriatica*). *Béla von Gámán* (born in 1866 in Kolozsvár, now Rumanian Cluj-Napoca) opened around 1911 a small sanatorium in Volosko port, and devoted it to dietetic treatments. Gámán later worked as a bath physician in Rogaška and in the Tatra Mountains (1916-1923), became a university professor in Cluj and in Pest, where he died in 1946.¹⁶ *László von Gámán* (born in 1897), Béla's son, appears between the two world wars as a physician in Dr. Mahler's sanatorium.

The First World War destroyed the *k.u.k. Abbazia Idylle* quite suddenly. The new Italian authorities feared the restoration of Austria so tremendously, that the Italian consular offices both at Vienna and Budapest were delaying to issue visas for many old guests and doctors in order to avoid their return to Opatija.¹⁷ However, Opatija was also interesting for a new generation of Hungarian physicians. At the beginning of the 1920s, the *Neues Sanatorium Dr. Schalk* (today *Villa Ambassador*) becomes *Nuova casa di cura Dott. Lakatos*, with 100 beds. *Viktor Lakatos* was a Hungarian who had already lead a similar institution in Baden near Vienna, while in Opatija he took over mostly orthopaedic and surgical reconvalescents, as well as gynaecological and internist patients. He soon was

¹³ DAR [Rijeka State Archives]. JU-8, box 73.

¹⁴ *Abbazia e la sua guida turistica / Touristenfuehrer von Abbazia*. Fiume: Stabilimento tipografico de "La Vedetta d'Italia" s.a., 1937.

¹⁵ *Adressbuch der oesterreichischen Riviera*. Abbazia: Franz Kreisel, n.d.

¹⁶ Gulyás: o.c.

¹⁷ DAR [Rijeka State Archives]. JU-8, box 678 and 679.

joined by his partner and brother, *Zoltán Lakatos* (born in 1882 in Vasvár, as a child of *Henrik Lakatos* and *Teréz Sonnenfeld*). While the trace of Viktor is lost in the 1930s, we know the fate of both Zoltán and that of his son Albert, who died in 1944 in Italy, after they had been abducted by the Nazis.¹⁸ In the Lakatos sanatorium worked Dr. *Sándor Lehel*, who had come to Opatija in 1921, and died probably in 1940 in Italy.

In 1934 came *Sándor Ledermann* (born in 1907 in Karcag) to Opatija. For a short period, he visited patients in *Villa Gemma*, but moved on to Calcutta in 1938. Similar destinations were followed by Dr. *István Sas* (born in 1904 in Jászberény, arrived to Opatija in 1932),¹⁹ *Ede Krausz* (arrived to Rijeka/Fiume in 1892, from Kéthely; in Opatija from 1930, but got a dentist license only in 1936), and *Ernö Weisz* (arrived in 1939 from Labin, Istria; emigrated in 1941).

After the Second World War once again, the world woke up in essentially rearranged relations and borders. Other languages became official, other political barriers were installed. Time was needed for the wounds to be cured. But we have lived long enough to see yet even this situation changing. The question that equally troubles the caterers, politicians, and historians of Opatija nowadays is: whether - once upon a time - could Opatija have again been attractive for dozens of Hungarian physicians and thousands of Hungarian guests,²⁰ and with the development of new health tourism initiatives and capacities, would it be possible to revive the good old times?

AMIR MUZUR, MD, MA, PhD

Department of History of Medicine
University of Rijeka
School of Medicine
Braće Branchetta 20
51000 Rijeka, CROATIA

SUMMARY

At the turn of the 20th century, in the frame of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Hungarian entrepreneurs – backed by the Hungarian government - attempted to launch a “Hungarian area” on the Adriatic coasts with the center of Crikvenica and Abbazia (presently Opatija). (This time Fiume (Rijeka), as the only Hungarian seaport has been partly possessed and governed by Hungarians). Author gives a short overview on these attempts with a special regard to the activity of Hungarian physicians on the Adriatic coasts, especially in Abbazia (Opatija) and to the health resorts founded by them, respectively. He calls our attention to the fact, that as a result of the activity of Hungarian physicians and entrepreneurs this period proved to be the so called “golden age” of Abbazia and of its environment.

¹⁸ Morgani, Teodoro. *Ebrei di Fiume e di Abbazia (1441-1945)*. Roma: Carucci, 1979.

¹⁹ DAR [Rijeka State Archives]. JU-30, box 225, 226, and 227.

²⁰ For a short overview of some of the famous Hungarian guests visiting Opatija, see Muzur, Amir, “Doprinos mađarskog elementa razvoju zdravstvenog turizma u Opatiji.” (Contribution of Hungarian Element to the Development of Health Tourism in Opatija). *Turizam* 45, no. 9-10 (1997) 248-251.