

# Prof. Dr. Valter Rukavina (1896.-1972.) - život između medicine i slikarstva

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Source / Izvornik: **Acta medico-historica Adriatica, 2008, 6, 91 - 100**

Journal article, Published version

Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:184:228639>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-11-29**



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## PROFESSOR VALTER RUKAVINA (1896–1972): LIFE BETWEEN MEDICINE AND PAINTING

PROF. DR. VALTER RUKAVINA (1896.–1972.) –  
ŽIVOT IZMEĐU MEDICINE I SLIKARSTVA

Ante Škrobonja

### SUMMARY

*This article on the occasion of the 111<sup>th</sup> birthday of professor Valter Rukavina (Rijeka, 1896-1972) recalls this extraordinary personality who is remembered by local and national history as an excellent physician, infectionist, university professor, equally successful scientist and practitioner, scholar and a polyglot, art lover, and last but not least, an extraordinary self-taught painter...*

*He graduated from secondary school in Sušak and studied medicine in Innsbruck, Graz, Vienna and Prague, where he received diploma in general practice in 1921. He started his career in Zagreb, then moved to Vrbovsko, Križevci, Osijek, and Zlatar as district physician. Meanwhile, at the Institute of Epidemiology he specialised in bacteriology, epidemiology, serology, hygiene, and medical chemistry. He successfully organised anti-typhus campaigns and mass vaccinations against scarlet fever and diphtheria, and established local healthcare stations. After a brief stay in Zagreb, in WW2 he was transferred to Bosnia, returned to Zagreb, and since 1946 until his death he had lived in his native Rijeka, where he started an infectious diseases department that later grew into the School of Medicine clinic. Being a practitioner and a scientist, he was interested in all aspects of infectious diseases and contiguous areas, and made a major contribution with his systematic research and successful implementation of preventive measures and complete eradication of the great brucellosis epidemic that broke out in Istria after WW2.*

*In addition to the membership in a number of professional associations, professor Rukavina was also an active member of the Rijeka chapter of the Croatian Association of Visual Artists.*

**Key words:** *History of medicine, infectology, epidemiology, 20<sup>th</sup> century, physicians, painters, Valter Rukavina, Croatia.*

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\* This review is a translated reprint of the article published in Croatian in Sušačka revija 2007;15(58/59):103-7. It has been slightly modified for this purpose; new photographs and references have been added, and the authors biography revised.

## EARLY PERIOD IN RIJEKA AND SUŠAK

Valter Rukavina, medical doctor, infectionist, university professor, equally successful scientist and practitioner, scholar and a polyglot, art lover, and an extraordinary self-taught painter was born in Rijeka on 17 April 1896 into a family of naval captain Artur Rukavina and Gisele Rukavina, nee Schubert.

For 19<sup>th</sup> century Rijeka, this was a typical Central European family. This environment produced a number of fine intellectuals, especially physicians (such as Ivan Dežman, Gjuro Catti, and Franjo Kresnik), who, according to late Radmila Matejčić, all shared *Viennese manners*, *Tuscan education*, and an unspoiled *Slavic soul*.

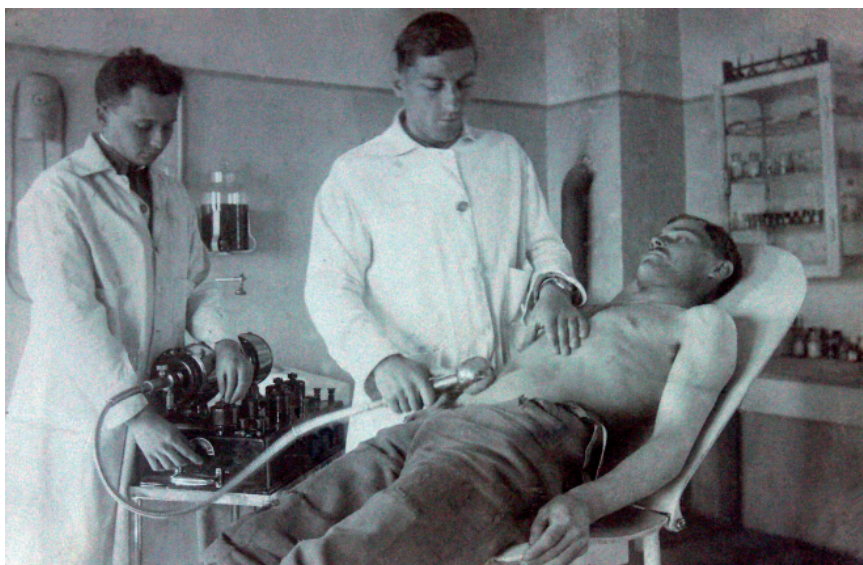
After the primary school, in 1906 young Valter enrolled in the grammar school in Sušak, a highly reputed institution boasting the best teachers from all over Croatia. All who completed this secondary school easily enrolled in any of the universities of the Hapsburg Monarchy.



Valter Rukavina as a medicine student in medical corps in WW1

*Student medicine Valter Rukavina u vojnom sanitetu tijekom Prvoga svjetskog rata.*

When I – another proud student of the Sušak grammar school - paid professor Rukavina a visit on several occasions some sixty years later, he would readily yet critically speak about those days. Comparing the two generations, he concluded that we got the better of it, that our education programmes were better adjusted to the needs of the young, and that our relationships with professors were much kinder. Without a cinema or a TV, they had less opportunity to learn or entertain themselves



First days of medical practice

*Prvi dani u praksi*

than we did. However, this is why extracurricular activities blossomed. Very popular were singing in choir and playing in orchestra, and literary groups kept up pretty fine. Many students were into sports; they exercised in Sokol, rowed for the school, and played football; in fact, the students' football club Viktorija ranked among the best in Croatia. In addition, many professors and students nurtured and publicly showed a certain political and nationalist attitude that was not appreciated by the authorities.

He would also recall a number of other things, including local anecdotes that entertained the residents of this little suburb on the eastern bank of the River Rječina.

### **FOLLOWING THE AESCULAPIAN ROUTE FROM INNSBRUCK TO ZAGREB**

After completing the grammar school in 1914, young Rukavina had to choose his vocation and enrol in a university. Since childhood, his wish had been to follow his ancestors, but medical screening for naval students showed that he was colour blind; he could not tell apart two key naval colours, red and green. As his wish was not granted, he had to find an

alternative. Eventually he chose medicine, and instead of the open seas took the route of Aesculapius from Innsbruck over Graz and Vienna to Prague, where he took medical diploma in 1921. That year in April he arrived in Zagreb to practice as assistant physician in the Foundation Hospital. Inspired by ideas of social medicine he soon left the capital, and spent the following 13 years (until 1935) as a district physician in Vrbovsko, Križevci, Osijek, and Zlatar. This was the period when, out of love for social medicine and epidemiology and using his institutional function, he was absorbed in solving public health care issues. He collaborated with the Institute of Bacteriology and Epidemiology and the School of Public Health in Zagreb



On honeymoon with his bride Vjera in Venice in 1928

*Na bračnom putovanju sa suprugom Vjerom u Veneciji 1928.*

with notable success. In 1924/1925 he specialised in bacteriology, epidemiology, serology, hygiene, and medical chemistry from the Institute of Epidemiology in Zagreb. Even earlier than that, he participated in the 1921/22 campaign against the typhus epidemic in the district of Velika Gorica. He organised large vaccination campaigns against scarlet fever in the district of Vrbovsko in 1925 and district of Zlatar in 1927/28, which included over 6000 children. In 1929 and 1930, he participated in a campaign launched by the School of Public Health, at first in a large survey, and then in vaccination against diphtheria.

During his office in Vrbovsko in 1924-1926, he established two healthcare stations in Bosiljevo and Ravna Gora, and after his transfer to



Zlatar, another two in the villages of Lobar and Orehovica. He also established mess halls in schools, held public lectures to popularize science and courses in housekeeping, started sanitary projects (for water supply, wells, public conveniences, and dungyards). On top of that, he ran a new Polyclinic for Schoolchildren in Križevci from 1932 to 1935.

In 1935, he returned to Zagreb to work in the Hospital for Infectious Diseases, and in 1939 became the acting director of the Foundation Hospital at Rebro, still under construction. With the beginning of WW2, the new authorities removed him from the position and transferred to Bosnia. There he set up temporary epidemic hospitals in Bihać, Slavonski Brod, Bosanski Brod, and Derventa. By the end of 1944 he returned to Zagreb in the capacity of the city epidemiologist to fight against typhus and run a few temporary epidemic hospitals. Between 1945 and 1946 he was the head of the epidemic hospital at Rebro.

Meanwhile he met Vjera Mance, daughter to the Ogulin hospital director, and married her in 1928. They had two children; but their daughter Nadica (born in 1929) died at the age of eight. Their son Vladimir (born in 1937) grew up to be a physician, and specialised in internal diseases, subspecialty gastroenterology.



At the Clinic for Infectious Diseases with his colleagues on the eve of retirement in 1968

*S kolegama na Klinici za infektivne bolesti uoči odlaska u mirovinu, 1968.*

## BACK TO RIJEKA

Just like many a seaman, in 1946 Valter Rukavina came home and restored life to hospital services in Rijeka with a group of physicians who remained after the war. In the prewar period, the Rijeka hospital did not have a ward for infectious diseases, but only a quarantine building in Škurinjska draga. Dr Valter Rukavina became the head Infectious Diseases Department which was given the premises of the former women's psychiatry ward. The new department was soon equipped by a laboratory that would become the Centre for Brucellosis in 1950.

When Rijeka University School of Medicine was founded in 1955, Dr Valter Rukavina joined in to teach. In 1958 he became a lecturer, in 1964 a reader (associate professor), and later full professor of infectious diseases, until retirement.

Even though he had published a few notable early papers before WW2, his scientific career peaked in the postwar period. His opus includes fifteen notable research and professional papers, and shows a wide spectrum of interest in infectious diseases and contiguous areas of research, from classical infectious diseases to new epidemics and novel solutions - often his



One of the pleasant days in retirement, behind the easel at the seaside on the island of Krk

*Jedan od sretnih umirovljeničkih dana za štafelajem na obali otoka Krka*

own – to solving traditional epidemiological issues at the local level. His major contribution was systematic research and successful implementation of preventive measures and complete eradication of the great brucellosis epidemic (a life-threatening infectious disease) that broke out in Istria after WW2. The importance of this epidemic was acknowledged by the World Health Organization, and Rijeka established the Centre for Brucellosis, headed by Dr Valter Rukavina.

His scope of interest, however, was not limited by specialty; Dr Rukavina always kept an eye on other fields of medicine and actively participated in the work of the Croatian Medical Association of the Rijeka and Zagreb chapters, was a member of Infectionists' Association, and participated in a number of congresses at home and abroad. On top, he was an active member of the Rijeka chapter of the Croatian Association of Visual Artists.

He received a number of awards for his work, including the Award of the City of Rijeka in 1962.

After retirement, professor Rukavina undertook to review the multitude of sketches and drawings he made during his many journeys and visits to places far and near.

Let me end this article with a tinge of nostalgia, as I recall one of the last meetings with professor Rukavina back in 1971. He then gave me an intriguing piece of wisdom, as only the rare breed can: "I can't see how a retired person can get bored. I'd need another lifetime of 48-hour workdays to turn all my sketches and ideas into paintings ...".

Death caught him in the middle of his undertaking in 1972, suddenly and too soon, taking this great physician over to his never completed landscapes, and teaching us that going along Aesculapius' path does not exclude other joys of life.



A 1970 photo of professor Valter Rukavina taken by the author of this article

*Prof. dr. Valter Rukavina na fotografiji autora ovog prikaza, 1970.*



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## SAŽETAK

U članku se u prigodi 111. godišnjice rođenja podsjeća na prof. dr. Valtera Rukavinu (Rijeka, 1896.–1972.) kao iznimnu ličnost koja se je u zavičajnoj i nacionalnoj povijesti podjednako uspješno afirmirala kao izvrstan doktor medicine, infektolog, sveučilišni profesor, podjednako uspješan praktičar i znanstvenik, erudit i poliglot, zaljubljenik u umjetnost, ali i osebujan slikar–samouk...

Školovanje je započeo u Rijeci, maturirao je u Sušačkoj gimnaziji, studirao u Innsbrucka Graza i Beča i Praga gdje je 1921. promaknut na čast doktora opće medicine. Profesionalnu karijeru započeo je u Zagrebu, nastavio kao kotarski liječnik u Vrbovskom, Križevcima, Osijeku i Zlataru. U međuvremenu se je u Epidemiološkom zavodu u Zagrebu usavršavao iz bakteriologije, epidemiologije, serologije, higijene i medicinske kemije. Na terenu uspješno provodi akcije na suzbijanju pjegavca i masovnog cijepljenja protiv škrleti i difterije, osniva zdravstvene stanice... Nakratko je u Zagrebu, tijekom rata biva premješten u Bosnu, vraća se u Zagreb, a zatim je od 1946. do smrti ponovno u Rijeci gdje pokreće odjel za zarazne bolesti koji će poslije prerasti u Kliniku Medicinskog fakulteta. Kao praktičara i znanstvenika zanimaju ga svi aspekti infektologije i graničnih područja, a najviše je postigao sustavnim istraživanjem i provedbom uspješnih mjera zaštite te konačnim iskorjenjivanjem velike epidemije brucelozе koja se u poslijeratnim godinama pojavila u Istri.

Osim u više stručnih udruga, kao slikar samouk uspješno djeluje i u Udruženju likovnih umjetnika Hrvatske u Rijeci.

**Ključne riječi:** povijest medicine, infektologija, epidemiologija, XX. stoljeće, liječnici, slikari, Valter Rukavina, Hrvatska

### Acknowledgement

*The author wishes to thank the son of professor Rukavina and colleague Dr Vladimir Rukavina and his wife Mrs Smiljka Rukavina whose recollections and family documents substantially helped in writing this article.*

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This review is based on an article published in Croatian in Sušačka revija 2007;15(58/59):103-7, with minor revisions, new photographs and sources added, and an updated and reorganised author's bibliography.