



*Hotel Speranza, danas Villa Dubrava, dio opatijske Thalassoterapije*  
*Former Hotel Speranza, now Hotel Villa Dubrava of the Thalassoterapia complex*

## THALASSOTHERAPY IN OPATIJA: A century and a half long tradition and half a century of an institution

OPATIJSKA THALASSOTHERAPIA – stoljeće i pol  
tradicije i pola stoljeća institucije

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### SUMMARY

*Within just a thirty-year period (1884-1914), Opatija was transformed from a village into a European tourist attraction, basing its offer primarily upon the favorable geographic-climatic elements and medical innovations of quality. This rich tradition is revived and continued by the Opatija Thalassotherapia, founded fifty years ago. By introducing new contents, the Thalassotherapia imposes itself as a regional leader in health tourism.*

**Key words:** History of medicine, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> Century, thalassotherapy, Opatija

The life of a place is often determined by coincidence. Opatija awoke from three and a half centuries of slumber, without much ado, like in a fairy tale. The road Rijeka-Volosko opened in 1838 a possibility for Rijeka aristocracy to take Sunday trips to the thickets south of Volosko in their horse-drawn carriages. A proud owner of one such carriage was Iginio Scarpa, a powerful Freemason, politician and merchant of Rijeka, who discovered Opatija, a village of seafarers, fishermen and weavers, counting no more than a hundred houses scattered between Škrbići, Jelenkina Vas and Domavići. Its lush vegetation, welcoming coves and the quiet made Scarpa buy this property from baron Hallerstein in 1844, build Villa Angiolina, and populate its park with exotic young plants from all over the world. The villa

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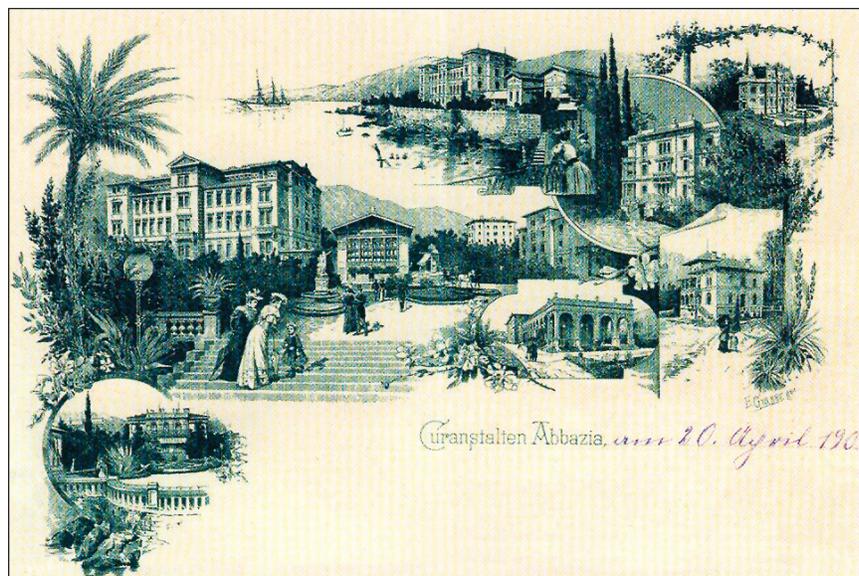


Figure 1 Letterhead drawing outlining health resort buildings in Opatija  
(State Archive in Rijeka)

*Slika 1. Memorandum s motivima objekata Lječilišnih zavoda Opatije  
(Državni arhiv u Rijeci)*

opened its doors to writers and botanists (Noë), politicians (Jelačić) and the highest aristocracy (the ex-empress Maria Ana), In fact, Scarpa was the first local renter (out of season, by today's standards) who lived in the villa with his sons only over the summer. Remarkably, his choice of invitees greatly helped that Opatia found itself on many an itinerary of Viennese salons in less than two decades. Books were published on the town and Villa Angiolina was swarmed by noblemen, merchants, and physicians.

The first thalassotherapy in Margate, England in the end 18<sup>th</sup> century; the first organised swimming resort in Dieppe, France in 1822, and the theory of the healing properties of water from Guastalla, Italy in 1842 encouraged innovation in seawater and climate therapy. With its resources and the number of guests, Opatija was a logical choice. Schrötter-Kristelli, the founder of the Viennese and international laryngology advocated the healing properties of the seawater spray (aerosol) in Opatija; Virchow was enchanted by its vegetation; and Giacich and Šporer, as well as Scarpa's son and heir Paolo, published articles, ideas and plans about a sanatorium for patients with chest diseases in 1869. The turning point for Opatija's health tourism however was when Friedrich Julius Schöler, the chair of the Viennese South Railways Company, gave his contribution in connections in

government, his managerial talent and financial support. From that point on, the course of events is more or less known; Julius Glax, a balneologist whom Schüler brought to Opatija in the 1880s, was the most prominent figure in the boom that ensued, establishing Opatija as the European top health resort. He immediately resolved the burning issues: first aid (1894), water supply (1897), roofed market (1897), cemetery (1903), sewage system (1907), and traffic (tram line Matulji-Opatija-Lovran, 1908). Schüler built hotels Quarnero (which started as a sanatorium in 1884) and Kronprinzessin Stephanie (1885) and several hotel outbuildings and villas, starting a period of great construction that would last until 1914 and result in over three hundred buildings, many of which equipped with baths and medical facilities. Those were the days when Opatija saw physicians from all over the Central Europe open their offices, at least from autumn to spring, only to move practice to other baths from Erdelj and Galicia to Lake Balaton and Austria in the summer. New medical treatments were patented such as Marina Trinkkur, Diana Franzbrandtwein, Laurol, Ovol, and hypselophonia (a particular kind of pectoral auscultation); there was a new specialised Zander laboratory, Ludwig Viktor Bad Institute and a Szegő sanatorium. Among physicians there were neurologists, dermatologists, dentists, internists, and rhinolaryngologists.

The golden age of health tourism in Opatija ended with the break of World War I. The Italian rule did not do as much harm to local tourism as is commonly believed, but it never reached the Austrian level. Italians did not place much confidence in health tourism, so they focused on attracting healthy visitors by organising events such as opera buffa festivals.

Thanks to Ćedomil Plavšić and his Thalassotherapia of 1957, Opatija saw a revival of health tourism under Yugoslavia. It introduced advanced rehabilitation programmes for cardiac patients which brought in many international health figures, congresses, US and WHO funds, and contracts with Austrian and Swedish insurance companies. Plavšić's withdrawal, war for Croatia's independence, and the economic collapse which ensued stripped Thalassotherapia to the bare functional bone of its earlier glory. Fortunately, it recovered soon and became the Reference Centre for Health Tourism and Medically Programmed Vacation of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Croatia in 1998. New scientific meetings ("Opatija: the Promoter of Health Tourism" in 1996, "Health Tourism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" in 2000, and other) gave new development directions and opened new perspectives. All these efforts were crowned by the new Centre for Obesity Prevention and Therapy in the renewed Vila Dubrava, a state-of-the-art Thalasso-wellness-centre opened in 2005. and by accommodating the Department of



Figure 2 Advocates and promoters of Opatija as a centre of thalassotherapy

*Slika 2. Promotori Opatije kao talasoterapijskog centra*

Physical Medicine” of the School of Medicine of the University of Rijeka in 2006. These achievements were recognised by two awards of the Town of Opatija, and set track for an ambitious development of Thalassotherapia toward the regional leadership in health tourism, and later maybe even in medical education and legislation.

#### SAŽETAK

*U samo tridesetak godina (1884.–1914.) Opatija se iz sela preobrazila u turističku atrakciju Europe, zasnivajući svoju ponudu prije svega na geografsko-klimatskim pogodnostima i kvalitetnim medicinskim inovacijama. Ovu bogatu tradiciju oživljava i nastavlja opatijska Thalassotherapia, osnovana prije pedeset godina, uvodeći nove sadržaje i namećući se kao regionalni vođa zdravstvenog turizma.*

**Ključne riječi:** *povijest medicine, XIX. i XX. stoljeće, Thalassotherapia, Opatija*