

A MAN OF GREATNESS RETURNS TO HIS NATIVE OPATIJA*

POVRATAK VELIKANA U RODNU OPATIJU

Sanja Simper**

SUMMARY

This report deals with a school project that prompted the organisation of the international scientific symposium «Dr. Leo H. Sternbach: Life and Work of Valium Inventor» (Opatija, Villa Angiolina, 18th May 2006.), and the unveiling of the commemorative plaque on the house in Opatija where Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach, an eminent American scientist originating from Opatija, spent his childhood.

The project was realised by the pupils of The Eugen Kumičić Grammar School in Opatija; Ana Petrovčić, David Deszô, Dominik Pažin, Davor Dujmić, Marin Dujmić and Hrvoje Tramontana during the 2005/6 academic year, as an assignment of the school history group. The project stemmed from a special curriculum on the holocaust and human rights education including the research into the history of pre-war Jewish community in Opatija, of which the Sternbach family was a part. It was based on the research of original archive material, biographic literature and the application of the historiographic method of oral history.

The project was expounded through PowerPoint presentation in the course of the symposium during which both foreign and Croatian presenters shed light on facts pertaining to life and scientific work of Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach, emphasising his exceptional contribution to the development of the medical science of the 20th century. On 18th May 2006, under the auspices of Roche Croatia and the Town of Opatija, the scientific symposium "Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach: Life and Work of Valium Inventor" was held at the Villa Angiolina in Opatija. Also, the unveiling of the commemorative plaque on the building at 114 Maršal Tito Street in Opatija, where Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach spent his childhood was ceremoniously performed, marking thus the perennial memory of this distinguished scientist (picture 14).

Key words: History of pharmacy, 20th Century, Leo H. Sternbach, scientific symposium, Opatija, Croatia

* A report from the Scientific symposium dedicated to the life and work of dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach, held on 18th May 2006. in Opatija

** Sanja Simper, The Eugen Kumičić Grammar School Opatija, 2, Drage Gervaisa, 51410 Opatija
E-mail address: sanja.dukic.delogu@ri.htnet.hr

Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach, (Opatija, 7th May 1908 – Nutley, New Jersey, 28th September 2005), an organic synthesis chemist is nowadays best known as one of the inventors of Valium, a tranquiliser that soon became a cultural icon. However, he also synthesised a whole class of new medications, i.e. benzodiazepines, which proved to be far more effective than previously employed barbiturate and opiate treatments. Valium represented a turning point in the clinical administration of tranquilisers and became the most sought - after medicine in the pharmaceutical industry. Within ten years after it entered the clinical use in 1963, it turned into one of the best selling medicines in the USA. Sternbach spent his working life in Roche laboratories in Switzerland and USA, he officially retired in 1973 but continued to work almost to the end of the century as a mentor to young scientists. He submitted 241 patents, was the author of 122 publications, a holder of numerous awards and honorary titles, one of them being the 1987 “Inventor of the Year”. In 2003, in the News and World Report survey, he was proclaimed one of the most influential Americans of the 20th century while in 2005 he was honoured for contributions to society and promoting scientific progress with the induction into the prestigious National Inventors Hall of Fame in Akron, Ohio (*Figure 1*).

It is noteworthy that the holding of the symposium and the putting up of the memorial plaque were instigated by Ana Petrovčić, David Deszô, Dominik Pažin, Davor Dujmić, Marin Dujmić and Hrvoje Tramontana, all of them students of the Eugen Kumičić Grammar School in Opatija. They are also members of a school history group that has been researching topics from the history of Jewish communities in Rijeka and Opatija within the scope of a special programme called “Holocaust and Human Rights Education” for several years now (*Figure 2*). As a leader of the history group, I knew that at the turn of the 20th century Mihael Sternbach had a pharmacy in Opatija and was one of the distinguished members of the Jewish community there. Only later, in February 2005, was I informed, through the editorial board of the Jewish Biographic Lexicon (under preparation) of the Jewish community in Zagreb, that his son Leo Henryk Sternbach grew to be one of the most prominent American scientists.

I decided to get in touch with him and ask for his cooperation in realising the school project. The students liked the idea since through this association they could expect to obtain many interesting particularities about Opatija at the turn of the century and the local Jewish community at that time. We had often enriched our research so far, by interviewing the contemporaries. Through American Roche, we sent Mr. Sternbach an

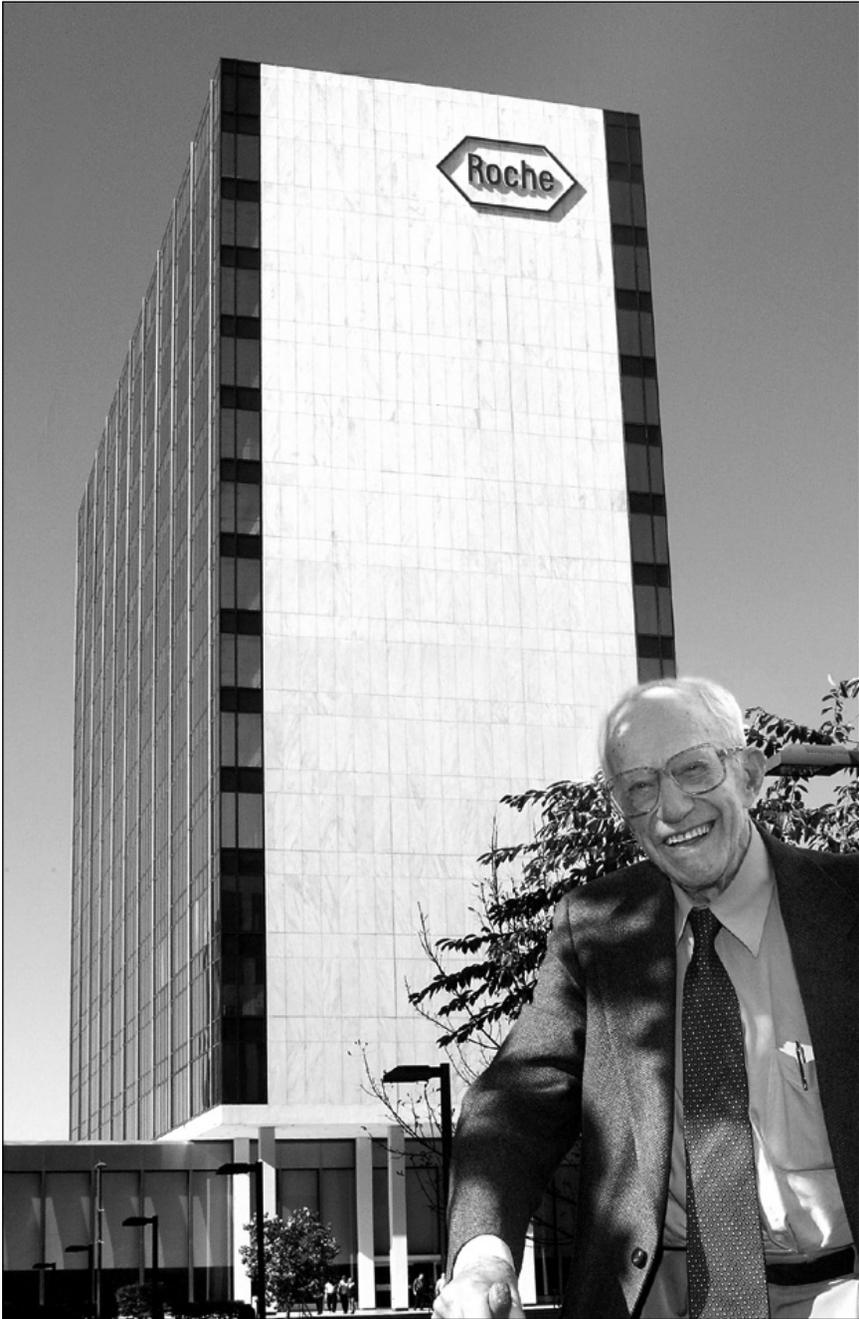


Figure 1 Dr. Leo H. Sternbach, May 2001

Slika 1. Dr. Leo H. Sternbach, svibanj 2001.

e-mail listing all the issues we were interested in. Two weeks later, in March 2005, we received the answer from Michael Sternbach, Leo's oldest son, which caused enormous excitement in our group while they seemed to be no less thrilled by our letter. The mail sent by Michael Sternbach contained among other things, the following:

"...Dad would be extremely pleased to answer any and all questions relating to the Jewish community history of Opatija. At least as much as he can remember. Please let us know whether you would rather do this on email or via the regular mail, and if you have a list of questions just send them via email and we will get started..."

The list was soon compiled and sent, together with the school PowerPoint presentation named "In the footsteps of the Jews of Opatija", which aimed to inform him of our work so far. We included some new as well as old postcards of Opatija as he might remember it from his childhood. He sent to us his biography (*Alex Baenninger et. al. Good Chemistry, The Life and Legacy of Valium Inventor, Leo Sternbach, McGraw – Hill, 2000*) whose first chapter was dedicated to his childhood memories in Opatija. Soon afterwards, the answers to our questions arrived together with interesting family photographs, photographs of some objects from the Sternbach pharmacy in Opatija, such as doctor's prescriptions, business cards etc. (*Figure 3*). In the meantime, we intensified our research in the libraries and the State Archive in Rijeka and found out new facts about the Sternbach family in Opatija (e.g. which house they lived in, where was the elementary school that Leo Sternbach attended etc.). Besides, we also discovered some very interesting tourist guides of the Austro – Hungarian Opatija that advertised the preparations and remedies from the Sternbach pharmacy (*Figure 4*). Throughout this period, we maintained constant touch with him and kept him informed of our work. At that time, an idea was born of marking his affiliation with Opatija. Thus, our proposition regarding the organisation of the scientific symposium and setting up of a commemorative plaque gained support from the town of Opatija and later of the Roche Croatia, which took over the task of organising the symposium with the aim of presenting to the public his scientific activity.

Unfortunately, Dr. Leo H. Sternbach passed away on 28th September 2005. We were notified of the sad loss by the family who answered to our letter of condolences with the following note:

"Please express our thanks to your pupils and colleagues. Dad was especially pleased to have had contact with you and to see all that you had done in the DVD



Figure 2 The students from the Eugen Kumičić Grammar School in Opatija (from the left): David Dezsó, Davor Dujmić, Sanja Simper, the history teacher, Hrvoje Tramontana, Marin Dujmić and Ana Petrovčić

Slika 2. Učenici Gimnazije Eugena Kumičića u Opatiji (slijeva nadesno): David Dezsó, Davor Dujmić, Sanja Simper, profesorica povijesti, Hrvoje Tramontana, Marin Dujmić i Ana Petrovčić

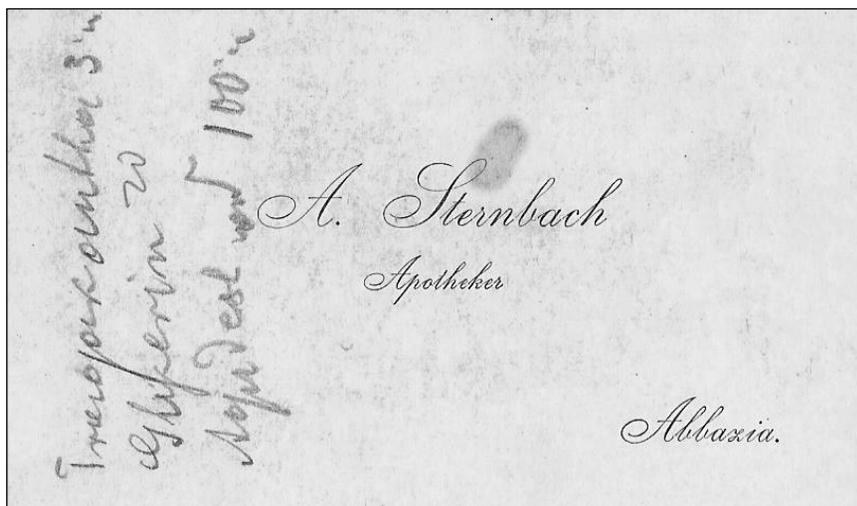


Figure 3 The Sternbach Pharmacy (in Opatija) business card

Slika 3. Posjetnica opatijskog ljekarnika Michaela A. Sternbacha



Figure 4 “Maltocodeinpastillen”,
a remedy from the Sternbach Pharmacy in Opatija

Slika 4. “Maltocodeinpastillen”, jedan od pripravaka Ljekarne Sternbach u Opatiji

you sent. While he did not remember as much as he would have liked to, he did make a reconnection with Abazzia again there with you, the new generation [...] Thank you again for including him in your project. He felt honoured.”

Warmest regards

The Sternbach family

As for us, we were also honoured to have had Dr. Leo.H. Sternbach participating in our project and were deeply touched by these words.

Soon we joined the official organisers in preparation of the symposium planned for May 2006, the month Dr. Leo H. Sternbach was born in. As a part of the symposium programme, the pupils prepared their PowerPoint presentation that focused on development of Opatija as the most famous Austro-Hungarian seaside resort from its beginnings, i.e. the building of the Villa Angiolina, first hotels and sanatoriums in the course of the second half of the 19th century until the World War I. This is the period in which Mihael Sternbach’s pharmacy located in the Mandria Bazaar in the town centre flourished as well (Figure 5). In the presentation, they used Dr. Leo Sternbach’s reminiscences of onetime Opatija and the photographs that were made available to them. Just prior to the symposium, Michael Sternbach, who had been informed about the forthcoming event, sent us another e-mail that said among other things the following:

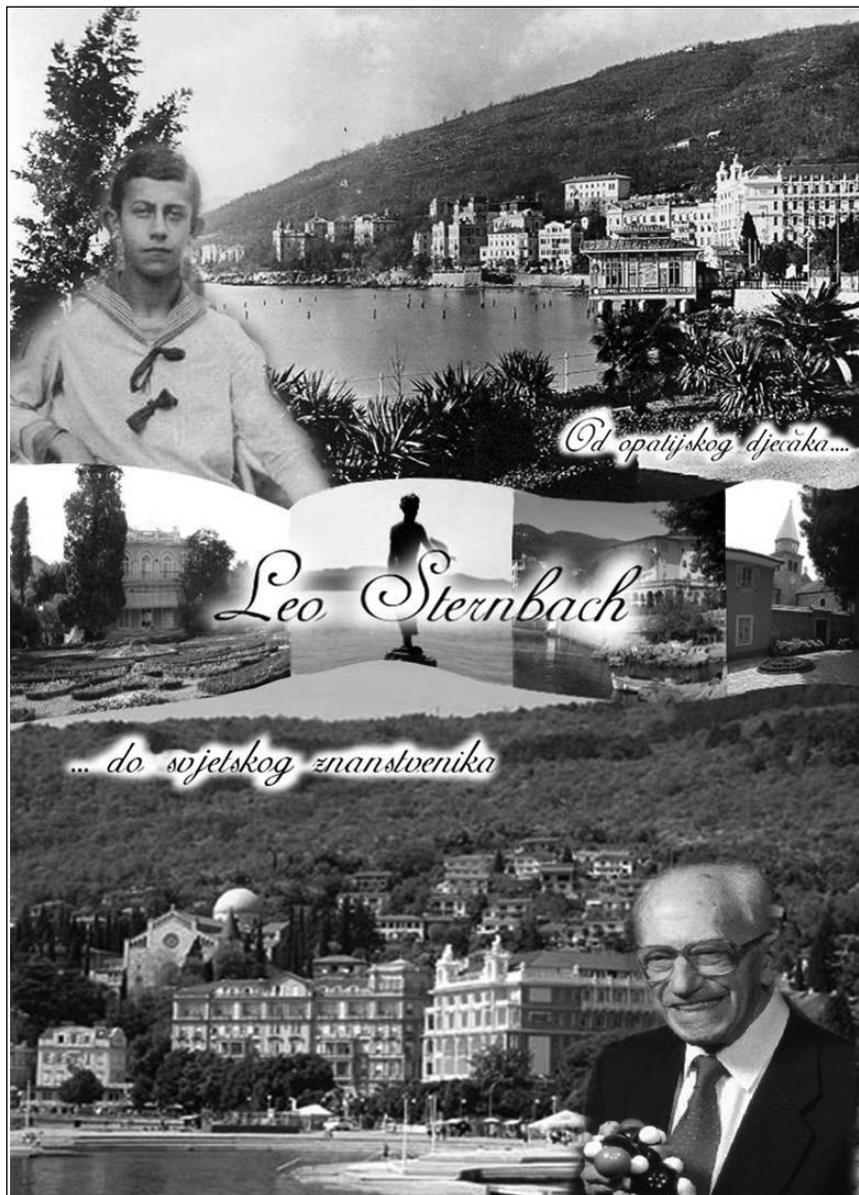


Figure 5 The project of the students of the Eugen Kumičić Grammar School presented at the scientific symposium “Dr. Leo H. Sternbach: Life and Work of Valium Inventor” (Opatija, Villa Angiolina, 18th May 2006.).

Slika 5. Projekt učenika Gimnazije Eugena Kumičića iz Opatije na znanstvenom simpoziju “Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach: Život i djelo izumitelja Valiuma” (Opatija, Villa Angiolina, 18. svibnja 2006.).

“Thank you very much for developing the program that will be dedicated to Dr. Leo H. Sternbach... We are pleased and proud that Dad will be remembered in and by Opatija. He would also be pleased and proud... Thank you for all the work that you put into this project. Who knew it would grow to this size.”

The pupils' presentation aroused keen interest after which I presented this paper, under the title “Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach's Childhood in Opatija”. Dr. Boguslaw Slawinsky, a Polish historian from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow spoke about the period after 1926, when the family moved to Poland and about his studies and the professional career until he immigrated to the USA. Sternbach studied pharmacy and chemistry at the Jagiellonian and earned his master's degree in pharmacy in 1929 and Ph.D. in organic chemistry in 1931. Against the elegant backdrop of the Villa Angiolina in Opatija other participants presented their in-depth reviews of the pharmaceutical, clinical and scientific significance of Sternbach's work to the interested audience.

Regrettably, the proceeds of this symposium have not been published as a separate publication so far (this text was completed in May 2007) and neither has our wish come true, to hold an annual conference that would bear the name of this renowned scientist, Opatija - born Dr. Leo H. Sternbach.

Prijevod na engleski / Translated by: Vanda Podgoršek

SAŽETAK

U prikazu je riječ o školskom projektu kojim je potaknuto održavanje međunarodnoga znanstvenog simpozija “Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach: Život i djelo izumitelja Valiuma” (Opatija, Villa Angiolina, 18. svibnja 2006.) te postavljanje spomen-obilježja na kuću u Opatiji u kojoj je dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach, ugledni američki znanstvenik rodom iz Opatije, proveo djetinjstvo.

Projekt su realizirali učenici Gimnazije Eugena Kumičića u Opatiji: Ana Petrovčić, David Dezsô, Dominik Pažin, Davor Dujmić, Marin Dujmić i Hrvoje Tramontana tijekom školske godine 2005./06., u okviru rada povijesne grupe. Projekt je proizišao iz posebnog programa edukacije o holokaustu i ljudskim pravima, koji uključuje i istraživanje povijesti predratne židovske zajednice Opatije, čijim je dijelom bila i obitelj Sternbach. Temelji se na istraživanju izvorne arhivske građe, biografske literature i periodike te primjeni historiografske metode usmene povijesti (oral history). Predstavljen je PowerPoint prezentacijom tijekom programa simpozija u kojem su strani i domaći izlagači osvijetlili činjenice iz života i znanstvenog djelovanja dr. Lea Henryka Sternbacha, istaknuvši njegov izvanredni doprinos razvoju medicinske znanosti XX. stoljeća.

Ključne riječi: povijest farmacije, XX. stoljeće, Leo H. Sternbach, znanstveni skup, Opatija, Hrvatska

AUSPITZ, KAPOSI AND NEUMANN: THE SUCCESSIONS TO FERDINAND HEBRA AND CARL L. SIGMUND IN THE VIENNA SCHOOL OF DERMATOLOGY

AUSPITZ, KAPOSI I NEUMANN: NASLJEDNICI
FERDINANDA HEBRE I CARLA L. SIGMUNDA U
BEČKOJ DERMATOLOŠKOJ ŠKOLI

Karl Holubar*

Ferdinand Hebra was the founding father of dermatology in Vienna. Joseph Plenck [1], his spiritual ancestor, after whom Robert Willan modelled his scheme, is less known and so is Carl L Sigmund [2], Hebra's friend and head of the 2nd department. Moritz Kaposi [3] 1837-1902, came from Sigmund's clinic, then joined and followed Hebra. Isidor Neumann [4], 1832-1906, came from Hebra's clinic and followed Sigmund. Heinrich Auspitz [5], 1834-1885, trained with Hebra, and in 1872 founded own centre (Policlinic of Vienna). Auspitz described and named acantholysis, but not the papillary type of the phenomenon. His system of dermatoses did not find acclaim. Neumann edited one of the first books on histopathology of the skin and described solar elastosis many years before Unna. *Pemphigus vegetans* carries his name. Kaposi described the first systemic lupus erythematosus, and then his "haemorrhagic" sarcoma, and edited the most famous textbook of the 19th century, especially the French edition by E Besnier and A Doyon of 1891. He presided over

* Prof Karl Holubar MD FRCP FAAD GSE. Med Univ of Vienna, Vienna, Austria. E-mail: karl.holubar@meduniwien.ac.at



Figure 1 First illustration of Kaposi sarcoma, (1868), Kaposi's 1st patient. Inst Hist Med, Med Univ Vienna

Slika 1. Prvi prikaz Kaposijeva sarcoma, 1868., prvi Kaposijev pacijent (copyright Institut za povijest medicine Medicinskog Sveučilišta u Beču)



Figure 2 Kaposi's tomb in Vienna, the statue is Martha Hebra, his wife, copyright K Holubar

Slika 2. Kaposijeva grobnica u Beču, statua prikazuje Marthu Hebru, njegovu suprugu (copyright K. Holubar)



Figure 3 Heinrich Auspitz, 1835-1886
copyright by Inst Hist Med, Med Univ Vienna

*Slika 3. Heinrich Auspitz, 1835.–1886.
(copyright Institut za povijest medicine Medicinskog sveučilišta u Beču)*



Figure 4 Isidor Neumann 1832-1906
in imperial uniform, copyright Inst Hist Med, Med Univ Vienna

*Slika 4. Isidor Neumann, 1832.–1906., u carskoj odori
(copyright Institut za povijest medicine Medicinskog sveučilišta u Beču)*

the 2nd International Congress in Vienna in 1892, and founded the Austrian Society of Dermatology in 1890, which had its first meeting even before the French. Today there are more than 850 members.

Austrian dermatology had its heyday at the turn of the 19th century. The demise of the heroes of the second line and the dismemberment of the country at the end of World War I closed the stage for 50 years. K Wolff, P Fritsch, K Konrad, H Hönigsmann, W Gebhart, H Kerl and others., succeeded in restoring some of the old glory. Two hundred years after Plenck's death and the early beginnings of the field in Vienna, the successors to the founding fathers also deserve a word of mention.

REFERENCES

1. Holubar K. Joseph Jacob Plenck. A forerunner of modern dermatology. *JAAD* 1984;10:326-32.
2. Holubar K.: Carl L. Sigmund (1810-1883): the world's first professor of syphilis. *Int J Dermatol* 1990;29:300-3.
3. Holubar K. Terminology and iconography of lupus erythematosus. *Am J Dermatopath* 1980; 2: 239-242
4. Holubar K. Ferdinand Hebra 1816-1880, Moriz Kaposi 1837-1902, Albert Reder Schellmann 1826-1904, Isidor Neumann 1832-1906 *JEADV* 2001;15:Suppl 2:54
5. Holubar K. Heinrich Auspitz (1835-1886), and what he should be remembered for. *Am J Dermatopath* 1987; 38:178-9