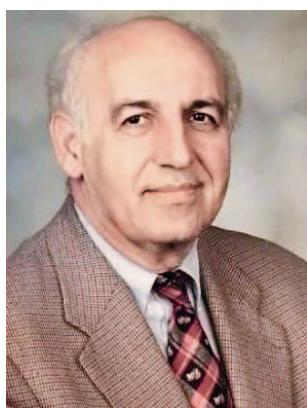




## LUKA MILAS (1939 – 2024)



In the United States of America, on November 11, the prominent oncologist and scientist Prof. Dr. Sc. Luka Milas left us forever at the age of 85. In addition to his research and medical achievements, he was also distinguished by many human virtues: diligence, humanity and modesty. He was both a cosmopolitan and an ardent Croatian patriot. He believed in Croatia and was among the first in the USA to selflessly join Tuđman's generation of intellectuals from the Croatian diaspora who knew how to win international recognition for *Lijepa Naša*.

Dr. Luka Milas was born to Ivan and Ana Milas on October 17, 1939 in Zmijavci, Croatia, on the eve of the feast day of St. Luke the Evangelist, patron saint of physicians. As the top student from the Imotski region of Croatia, Dr. Milas enrolled at the University of Zagreb School of Medicine where he likewise received his medical degree with top honors in 1963. Dr. Milas then joined the Immunology Laboratory at the Ruđer Bošković and Institute for Tumors, earning a Master of Science degree in Transplantation Immunology in 1965, followed by a Ph.D. in Physiology in 1966. It was in 1967 that Dr. Milas first came to M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, to pursue post-doctoral training. Over the next decade, sharing his time between M.D. Anderson and the Institutes of Ruđer Bošković and Central Institute of Tumors in Zagreb, he ascended several professorship levels at those institutions, ultimately settling down in Houston in 1980 and serving for 22 years as Professor and Chairman of Experimental Radiation Oncology at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

A pioneer in radiation oncology, Dr. Milas became world renowned for his scientific and clinical achievements, including the development of new cancer therapies and radiosensitizing agents. Throughout his career, Dr. Milas focused on expanding the understanding of cancer biology. A hallmark of his research was its clinical translational potential with benefits that cured many cancer patients. As described by his peers, Dr. Milas was the symbol of a meticulous and brilliant scientist with extraordinary talents for scientific investigation which brought forth an abundance of achievements, including new cancer therapies, the publication of more than 400 scientific articles, reviews, and book chapters, continuous NIH grant funding, the service and leadership on multiple professional committees and editorial boards, and many honors and awards. His work led to the now widely used concomitant boost radiotherapy for the treatment of head and neck cancer. He was the first to show that the combination of cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) enzyme inhibitors with radiotherapy is selectively toxic to some cancers. Dr. Milas pioneered the exploration of the role of COX-2 and its products, prostaglandins, in tumor response to radiation, holding the patent for the use of COX-2 inhibitors with radiation.

A beloved mentor and teacher, Dr. Milas tirelessly promoted the careers of countless students, post-doctoral fellows, and radiation oncologists from all over the world. Even in these recent years, he fondly spoke of colleagues in Houston, the Americas, Asia, Australia, Europe and of course Croatia. Dr. Milas was honored in his lifetime with multiple teaching excellence awards and visiting and honorary professor-

ships. He was legendary in his ability to explain and make complex topics become so clear, whether in medicine or history. Noteworthy honors included the Miles Fellowship Scholar Award and the American Society of Radiology and Oncology (ASTRO) Gold Medal Award in recognition of his lifetime meritorious achievements in translational research. He held the United Energies endowed professorship at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. Dr. Milas was inducted as a corresponding member into the Croatian Academy of Science and Art in Zagreb (Hrvatska Akademija Znanosti i Umjetnosti), the highest honor from his native country where his career began in 1963.

Poignant childhood stories give witness to humble circumstances full of suffering in the midst of hunger, war and persecution. Dr. Milas approached all of his life with endless good will, optimism, generosity, altruism, honesty, fearlessness, gratitude and dedication to noble ideals. With his beloved wife Ljerka, Lukas's commitment to help all who came to the Houston Medical Center for medical care and medical education was unwavering. Opening the doors of their family home to welcome patients from Croatia and from all over the world and from all walks of life, they were devoted to serve: "samo nadite doktora Milasa i sva vrata će Vam biti otvorena." Following his inspiration, his children and relatives from several branches of the family tree dedicated their lives to service in the medical field. Becoming one of the most distinguished physicians in the history of Croatian medicine, Dr. Milas uplifted the opportunities of entire generations to achieve success in the USA and Croatia. With kindred spirits of his own generation, Dr. Milas was a tireless advocate for the freedom of Croatian people, cherishing their 1000-year-old history and faithful roots, and contributed to the independence of this beautiful and amazing country.

Luka's loving wife of 62 years, Ljerka, was by his side in each moment of his life, including with their children mercifully in the moment of his last breath at age 85. As United States citizens, they cherished the freedom to pray at Our Lady of Joy Catholic Church, where private funeral rites were held and the hope nurtured to one day be interred reunited in eternal rest in Croatia.

In the deep sadness of this passing, we honor our husband, father, grandfather, physician, colleague and friend Dr. Luka Milas and the legacy he leaves: a Christ-centered life, devoted love of his family, service to all in need, gracious endurance of hardships, the importance of hard work, the gifts of his vocation as a physician, his example of being a shining beacon of positivity as a way to embrace life to the fullest. He lived each day with humility and joyfulness. His life work garnered international acclaim and brought honor to both his native and adopted homelands.

*Ivan Milas*