

## MORI OGAI AS A SURGEON-MAJOR IN THE GERMAN EMPIRE OF 1884-88

### SUMMARY

*Rintaro Mori alias Ogai (1862-1922) studied medicine at the Royal University of Tokyo. At the time, lectures were given in German. The ministry of war sent the young surgeon-major to Berlin to study military hygiene and sanitation from 1884-88. His teachers were Franz Hofmann, Max von Pettenkofer, Robert Koch and others. He joined Saxon and Prussian armies. He also wrote poetry and novels. Back in Japan, he had a splendid career, and was eventually promoted to army head physician. His literary work comprises 38 volumes.*

**Key words:** *history of medicine, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> century, military surgery, poetry, Japan, Germany*

Mori Rintaro was born in Tsuwano (now Shimane) on the Japan Sea (Nihon Kai) on 19 January 1862 to a physician of Western learning, which were then called rangakusha. His Samurai family had served the Daimyo Kemei for 11 generations. Because male descendants were in short supply, his father and grandfather were both adopted into the Mori family. From 1869 through 1872, Rintaro went to school at the Yorokan in Tsuwano, where his unusual talent was recognised. He was educated in the spirit of Neoconfucianism both at school and home. This traditionally included classic Sinology. He soon mastered Chinese characters, which he later used to write his translations from German. When the feudal system was abolished in 1871, the Mori followed their Daimyo to Tokyo where Rintaro studied German at the Shinbungakusha until 1874, in preparation of his study of medicine. Followed a preliminary medical examination (Vorphysikum). From 1877 to 81, he studied medicine at the Royal University. Thereafter, he found an employment at the ministry of war. In 1884, the government sent him to Germany to study hygiene and to become familiar with the sanitary practice in the German military.

### POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN LEIPZIG, DRESDEN, MUNICH AND BERLIN

On 11 October 1884 Mori arrived in Berlin, witnessing the splendour of the period of promoterism. He was introduced to the Japanese ambassador and met other Japanese officials and students. On 22 October, he



Figure 1 Ogai Mori with Dr Roth in Dresden in 1885.

travelled to Leipzig and began his study at the hygienic institute under Professor Franz Hofmann. In his leisure time he became absorbed in the works of German poets. He was particularly fascinated by an issue of collected novels in several volumes. During a pub-crawl, in the well known restaurant Auerbachs Keller he made a promise to the Japanese philosopher Sonken that he would translate *Faust* into Old Chinese-style poem, a promise he kept later in Japan. His fellow-students taught him to drink beer and row on the river Pleiße, but he also went with them to concerts and other evening parties. On several occasions, he met his teacher from Tokyo, Professor Erwin Bälz who was on home leave in Leipzig.

Acquaintance with general surgeon-major Dr Wilhelm Roth led him to Dresden (Fig. 1), where he enrolled in an advanced training for military physicians in winter 1885/86. Shortly he gained access to the highest-ranking circles of the society and became a more frequent guest at court balls. He participates in an autumnal maneuver of the Saxon army. In the head-



Figure 2 Illustration for *Fumizukai (The Courier)* by Ogai  
(with Ida von Bülow)

quarters he found the material for his first novel *The Courier (Fumizukai, Fig. 2)*. In a geographic society he read a paper about Japanese dwellings. There he met geologist Dr Edmund Naumann (1875-85 in Tokyo) whose comments on Japan displeased him. A bitter dispute arose which was later reported by the Munich press under the title “The Truth about Japan”: Finally, Naumann had to admit that he was wrong about Japan.

On 8 March 1886, Mori, who was promoted to surgeon-major in the meantime, went to Munich, where he attended lectures by Professor Max von Pettenkofer. In Munich he also made a large circle of friends among military surgeons. He resided near Theresienwiese, visited the October festival, museums, theatres and evening parties. He wrote several scientific papers, which were published in German journals. Mori developed a special preference for the lake Starnberg, which he often visited alone or with friends. There he composed poems about King Ludwig II who drowned in that lake on 13 June 1886.



*Figure 3 Ogai Mori with other Japanese students in Berlin 1888*

On 16 April 1887, Mori returned to Berlin, now with a new pseudonym Ogai, and devoted himself to the study of bacteriology with Robert Koch. Occasionally he would pay a visit to pathologist Rudolf Virchow. He would also visit the Yamato-club for the Japanese residents in Berlin (Fig. 3). On 17 July, his chief of staff from the ministry of war came to Berlin. Mori accompanied him as a translator and speaker on international congresses held in Karlsruhe and Vienna. From 10 March through 1 July 1888, he served as army surgeon at the 2<sup>nd</sup> infantry regiment of the imperial guards. On 5 July he left for home, sailing from Marseille to Yokohama, where he disembarked on 8 September, bringing along a library of 450 volumes in German.

### **ROMANCE WITH A BALLET DANCER IN BERLIN, MARRIAGE IN TOKYO**

Ogai's diary has detailed descriptions of several young women. He wrote poems about the girls of Berlin and was very interested in the girlfriends of his fellow students. Nevertheless, the reader may be surprised to learn that at his journey home, Ogai was in the company of one Elise Wiegert. After a few month stay in a hotel, the Mori family sent her back



Figure 4 Ogai Mori in about 1912.

to Berlin. Ogai wrote about this romance in his famous novel *The Dancing Girl (Maihime)*, which has a moral on duty at Japanese High schools. In accordance with his rank, Ogai Mori was married to Toshiko, a daughter of a vice-admiral. However, the couple divorced after one year of marriage. He named his son Otto (1890-1967) and his grandson Max (1920-2000). Like himself, both were physicians in Tokyo.

#### HEAD PHYSICIAN OF THE ARMY AND A LITERARY MAN

In 1891, Ogai Mori was promoted to a doctor of medicine. Besides teaching at the military medical academy, whose head he became in 1893, he founded and published a journal of hygiene. He also edited a collection of poems and translated European novels. As medical superintendent of the Guards corps, he participated in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894/5). From 1898 to 1902, Ogai served in Kyushu. There he married Shige, a 22 year-old daughter of a district judge in 1902. In 1903, Ogai translated Clausewitz's major work, *On War*, still very popular in military and commercial circles of Japan. After the Russian-Japanese War of 1904/5, he published another collection of poems with the theme of war. In 1907, he was promoted to the head physician of the army and director at the ministry of war (Fig. 4). Dismissed from the army in 1917, he became the director of the Royal museum and curator of fine arts. He translated numerous contemporary plays. Rintaro Mori, M.D., died of tuberculosis on 9 July 1922.

At an early age, Ogai Mori was already showing a disposition toward poetry. The years in Germany strongly influenced this talent. His literary work comprises 38 volumes. As an author, reviewer and translator he has lastingly influenced the Japanese literature and his merits for German-Japanese relations are widely recognised. On 12 October 1984, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his arrival in Berlin, the Mori Ogai memorial was opened in the Luisenstr. 39, the only remaining residence of his in Germany (Fig. 5).

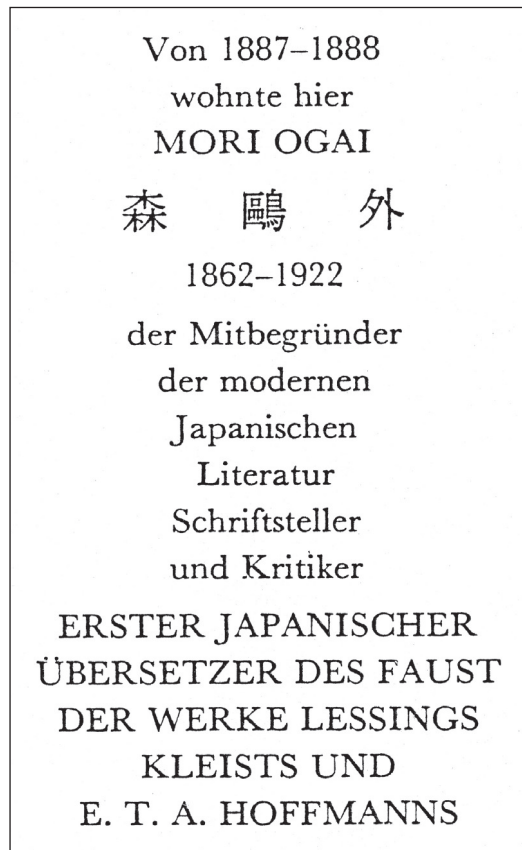


Figure 5 Memorial tablet at the house in Lützenstr. 39 in Berlin,  
mounted in 1966.

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