

# The Disease of Franz Kafka

**Mydlík M., Derzsiová K.**

Nephrological Clinic of the Medical Faculty of P. J. Šafárik University  
and the Faculty Hospital of L. Pasteur, Košice, Slovak Republic

Received June 6, 2005, Accepted July 6, 2005

*The paper was given as a lecture in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka on November 5, 2004 in Tatranská Lomnica, the High Tatras and in the 12<sup>th</sup> Memorial Medical Meeting of Professor F. Pór, M.D., on April 25, 2005 in Košice, Slovak Republic.*

**Key words:** Franz Kafka – Lung Tuberculosis – Monument of Franz Kafka  
– Tatranské Matliare – The High Tatras – Slovak Republic

**Mailing Address:** Prof. Miroslav Mydlík, MD., DSc., Nephrological Clinic  
of University Hospital of L. Pasteur, Medical School of University of P. J. Šafárik,  
Rastislavova 43, 041 90 Košice, Slovak Republic, e-mail: k.derzsiova@fnlp.sk

**Abstract:** On June 3, 2004, 80 years have passed since the death of one of the greatest and the most important world writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Prague German writer Franz Kafka. On November 5, 2004 we reminded that remarkable anniversary, which was also the 3rd anniversary of revelation of the monument of Franz Kafka in Tatranské Matliare, the High Tatras. Franz Kafka suffered from lung tuberculosis from 1917 until his death 1924. He was treated on lung tuberculosis in the sanatorium “Villa Tatra“ from December 20, 1920 until August 27, 1921 in Tatranské Matliare, the High Tatras. Lung tuberculosis was a very dangerous disease in that time and the treatment by dietotherapy, climatotherapy and symptomatic therapy without antituberculous drugs was less effective in many patients. In the paper the disease of Franz Kafka was described according to available literature.

On June 3, 2004, 80 years have passed since the death of one of the world greatest and the most influential writers of the beginning of the twentieth century, the Prague German writer Franz Kafka [1, 2, 3]. Apart of this, on May 16, 2004 three years have passed from the revealing of Franz Kafka’s monument in Tatranské Matliare, the High Tatras. Franz Kafka is the author of three novels – Not Heard (America), (1912), The Trial (1914), The Castle (1922), the author of many short stories (Transformation, Verdict, A Country Doctor, A Hunger Artist, Description of a Fight and others), the author of letters devoted to his relatives

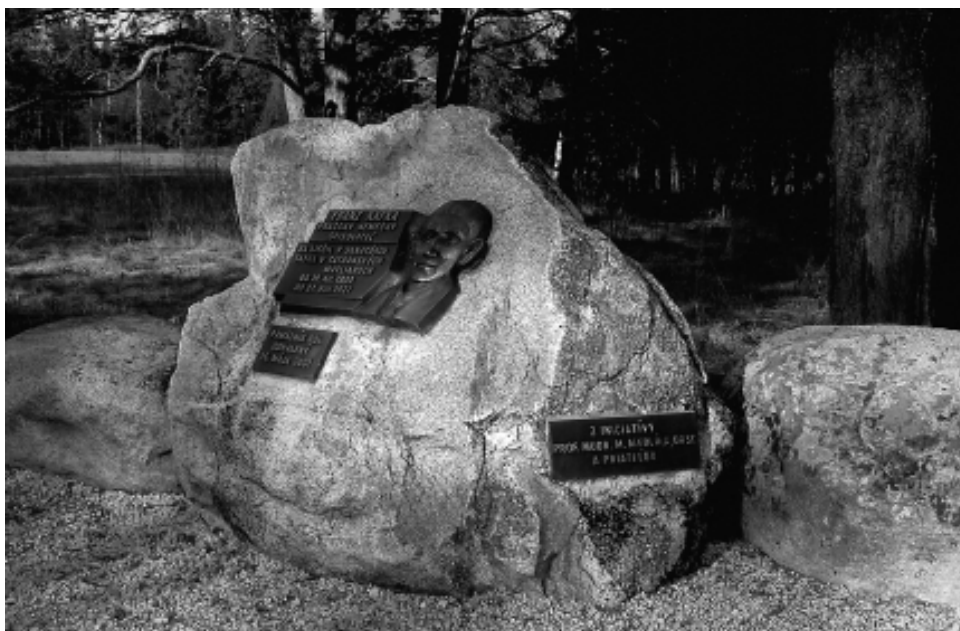


Figure 1 – The monument of Franz Kafka in Tatranské Matliare, the High Tatras.

and friends (the best known are letters to Milena Jesenská), aphorisms and other literary texts including his own diary. With Franz Kafka's personality the Prague German literature reached its artistic peak. It reflected complicated cultural and social situation of that time as well as author's own fantastic, fearful, inquiring and irreproducible depiction of world vision. Franz Kafka's literary work is nowadays understood as an urgent and desperate warning against the dehumanized world and belongs to the everlasting values of the world literature.

Authors of this paper being also the main initiators of building and revealing Franz Kafka's monument in Tatranské Matliare, as well as initiators of the First Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka in Tatranské Matliare in 2001 (Figure 1), [4, 5], decided to organize the Second Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka in the same place on the occasion of about mentioned anniversaries (Figure 2).

The first part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka took place on November 5, 2004 at his monument in Tatranské Matliare. A lot of important personalities participated – among them RNDr. M. Mališová, Head of Franz Kafka's Centre in Prague, Ing. M. Šturcel from "Štátne lesy" of Tatra's National Park in Tatranská Lomnica, Professor A. Jenča, MD., PhD., Dean of the Medical Faculty of P. J. Šafárik University in Košice. In the opening part of the Memorial Meeting A. Jurečková from the Municipal Authorities in Starý Smokovec, the High Tatras presented the prose of Franz Kafka "An Unexpected Walk". On closing of the first part of 2<sup>nd</sup> Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka, Lucia Vaničková, student



Figure 2 – The programme of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka, which was held in Tatranské Matliare and Tatranská Lomnica on November 5, 2004.

of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of State Conservatorium in Košice, performed a composition for the violin from the second score d-mol “Sarabanda Guige” by J. S. Bach (Figure 3).

The second part of 2<sup>nd</sup> Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka continued in the Information Centre of “Štátne lesy” Tatra’s National Park in Tatranská Lomnica. After the opening speech of Professor M. Mydlík, MD., DSc., the programme proceeded further by the speech of Ing. M. Šturcel, representative of “Štátne lesy” Tatra’s National Park, who welcomed the guests and participants. In the following two lectures JUDr. J. Gašpar, director of the State Scientific Library in Košice, had a speech on the history of Tatranské Matliare and simultaneously he presented the history showing some historical pictures on the posters including the stay of Franz Kafka in Tatranské Matliare. Mag. Ľ. Rusnáková from library in Poprad described the relationship between Franz Kafka and Max Brod during his stay in the High Tatras.

The programme continued with lecture by Professor M. Mydlík, MD., DSc., and Ing. K. Derzsiová from the Nephrological Clinic of the Medical Faculty of P. J. Šafárik University and Faculty Hospital of L. Pasteur in Košice. The paper dealt with Franz Kafka’s disease, which to some extent influenced his literary work (Figure 4), [6].

From 1917 until his death Franz Kafka suffered from lung tuberculosis, but despite this, he continued in writing intermittently till the end of his life. Tuberculosis was at that time a disease that was hard to cure without



Figure 3 – The view on the first part of the 2nd Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka, which was held on November 5, 2004 in Tatranské Matliare.

contemporary possibilities to use antituberculous drugs. His disease was manifested by haemoptoe during the night from 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> August 1917 in his flat in Schönborn Palace in Prague-Malá Strana. Haemoptoe has been repeated on the following night [1].

In the following years Franz Kafka underwent some therapeutic stays in various villages and sanatoriums (Sřem, Turnov and Źelízý in Czechoslovakia and Merano in Italy). From December 20, 1920 to August 27, 1921 Franz Kafka was treated in the sanatorium “Villa Tatra” in Tatranské Matliare, the High Tatras (Figure 5). It was his longest stay during his relatively short but very active life that he spent outside Prague [1].

It was known till nowadays that Franz Kafka has written only one text “Aus Matlárháza” during his stay in Tatranské Matliare. The text was published in the journal “Karpathen-Post” 42, 1921, No. 17, p. 1 about exhibition of the amateur water-colour painter Antonín Holub. Jiří Stromšík, one of the members of editorial staff of Kafka’s collected works, translated the fragment and the prose of Franz Kafka “Writing is denied” and “Away from here”. According to J. Stromšík these texts were written by Franz Kafka in February 1921 that means during his stay in Tatranské Matliare. The texts were published in the third volume of Kafka’s collected works: Short stories III (The Married Couple and other texts from inheritance) pp. 102–104, the Work of Franz Kafka, Vol. III, Kafka’s Publishing



Figure 4 – The view on the second part of the 2nd Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka, which was held on November 5, 2004 in Information Centre of “Štátné lesy” Tatra’s National Park in Tatranská Lomnica, the High Tatras.

house, Prague 2003, 363 pp. Apart from these literary texts Franz Kafka wrote a lot of letters from Tatranské Matliare: Letters to his sisters Elli, Valli and Ottla (12 letters), to his brother-in-law David, to his friend Max Brod (18 letters) and to Minza Eisner (3 letters), [ 7, 8].

Max Brod was his best and closest friend, author of his curriculum vitae and postmortal publisher of his work. He sent him a questionnaire to Tatranské Matliare concerning his state of health. Franz Kafka answered the questionnaire in such a way: weight increased? 8 kg; total weight? 65 kg; objective pulmonary findings? secret of physician, supposedly good; fever? mostly without fever; breathing? was not good, especially during the cold winter months; signature: the only question, that embarrassed and confused Franz Kafka [9]. During his stay in Tatranské Matliare Franz Kafka suffered from total weakness and lack of appetite. Moreover, he had got increased temperature and suffered from irritative and productive cough and he overcame pneumonia during his stay in the High Tatras. In Tatranské Matliare Franz Kafka was treated according to the standards of that time: bed rest during the day, lying on the balcony as a method of climatotherapy. He was on a diet with a large amount of milk, he took antipyretic drugs, codeine and other symptomatic drugs and in this way, the physicians tried to reduce symptoms of lung tuberculosis [10]. During his stay in Tatranské Matliare Franz Kafka got acquainted with another patient, Robert Klopstock, who was a student of medicine and who became his friend.

After Franz Kafka left Tatranské Matliare his health status did not change significantly so he proceeded in curative stays in the spas: Špindlerův Mlýn, Planá n/Lužnicí and in German spa Müritz near the Baltic sea. In the spa Müritz Franz Kafka met Dora Diamant who became his life partner during his stay in Berlin in 1923, and she was also present at his death-bed together with Robert Klopstock, MD.

In March 1924 Robert Klopstock, MD., found out loss of the voice in the patient Franz Kafka and in April 1924 at the Otorhinolaryngological Clinic of Professor Hajek in the General Hospital in Vienna (Austria), this was professionally judged as laryngophthisis. Franz Kafka was moved with progressive lung tuberculosis and laryngophthisis from the Otorhinolaryngological Clinic in Vienna to Hoffmann's



Figure 5 – Sanatorium “Villa Tatra”, in which Franz Kafka was treated on lung tuberculosis from December 20, 1920 to August 27, 1921 in Tatranské Matliare.

MD., sanatorium in Kierling, today it is a part of Klosterneuburg not far from Vienna, where he died among his friends on June 3, 1924.

The last short story written by Franz Kafka in Prague, in the period from March 19 to April 4, 1924, was “Singer Josephine – or – a mouse nation”, and probably marked with his developed laryngophthisis. The funeral of Franz Kafka was held at the Jewish Cemetery in Prague-Strašnice, on June 11, 1924.

Second Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka was organized in closed cooperation with Municipal Authorities in Starý Smokovec and “Štátne lesy” Tatra’s National Park in Tatranská Lomnica on the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Franz Kafka’s death and third anniversary of revealing of the monument for this remarkable personality of the world literature in Tatranské Matliare. The celebration was held in the festive atmosphere. This ceremony showed that the cultural public in the High Tatras and the whole region of Eastern Slovakia honoured the memory of Franz Kafka.

## References

1. WAGENBACH K.: Franz Kafka . Second edit., Prague 1993, 179 pp. (in Czech).
2. BROD M.: Franz Kafka, Biography. First edit., Odeon, Prague 1966, 290 pp. (in Czech).
3. BROD M.: Franz Kafka, Biography. Second edit. Publishing House of Franz Kafka, Prague 2000, 228 pp. (in Czech).
4. MIŠKUFOVÁ H.: Franz Kafka in the High Tatras. *Česká Beseda* 7: 9, 2001. (in Slovak).
5. MYDLÍK M., DERZSIOVÁ K.: Franz Kafka in Tatranské Matliare. *Vnitř. Léč.* 48: 60–61, 2001. (in Slovak).
6. MYDLÍK M.: II<sup>nd</sup> Memorial Meeting of Franz Kafka in Matliare. *Tatry* 2: 31, 2005. (in Slovak).
7. KAFKA F.: Letters to Ottila and Family. Aurora, Prague 1966, 166 pp. (in Czech).
8. KAFKA F.: Tatra’s Letters. Selection from correspondence 1920/1921. Tatra’s Library, Poprad 1997, 54 pp. (in Slovak).
9. KAFKA F. & BROD M.: Friendship, Correspondence. First edit. Hynek, Prague 1998, 453 pp. (in Czech).
10. THOMAYER J.: Pathology and Therapy of Internal Diseases. Fifth edit. Bursík & Kohout, Prague 1923, 1085 pp. (in Czech).