

# Robert Klopstock and Franz Kafka – the Friends from Tatranské Matliare (the High Tatras)

**Mydlík M.<sup>1</sup>, Derzsiová K.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Nephrological Clinic of Medical Faculty, P. J. Šafárik University and

<sup>2</sup>Logman, a.s., Košice, Slovak Republic

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**Mailing Address:** Professor Miroslav Mydlík, MD., DSc., Nephrological Clinic, Medical School, Univ. P. J. Šafárik, Rastislavova 43, 041 90 Košice, Slovak Republic; e-mail: k.derzsiova@fnlp.sk

**Abstract:** The paper summarises the accessible literature on the life and work of well-known American lung surgeon, Professor Dr. Med. Robert Klopstock, who was in the years 1920–1924 a friend Franz Kafka. Professor Klopstock was of Hungarian origin and he got acquainted with Franz Kafka at the end of the year 1920 in Tatranské Matliare (The High Tatras). They were both patients treated for lung tuberculosis. They became close friends and their mutual correspondence shows their real friendship. Robert Klopstock was present at Franz Kafka's death-bed on June 3, 1924 in Kierling, near Klosterneuburg, not far from Vienna. Robert Klopstock studied at Medical Faculties of the Universities in Budapest, Prague, Kiel and Berlin. After his graduation in 1933 in Berlin, he worked as a lung surgeon at various surgical clinics and departments in Budapest and Berlin. In 1936 Robert Klopstock together with his wife visited the High Tatras and Tatranské Matliare. In 1937 Robert Klopstock with his wife Gizela, a writer and a translator, who translated the first chapters of Franz Kafka's novel "Trial" into Hungarian language, went to United States of America. During his stay in USA Dr. Med. Robert Klopstock was very active as a lung surgeon and a scientist. He published 64 specialized scientific papers, mostly in American medical journals. He became Professor of Lung Surgery at Downstate Medical Centre in New York – Brooklyn. He died on June 15, 1972 in New York.

The aim of this study was to show the life and work of Robert Klopstock according the accessible literature. Robert Klopstock was a patient from Villa Tatra sanatorium in Tatranské Matliare and Franz Kafka got acquainted with him at the end of the year 1920 and at the beginning of his curative stay in the High Tatras. He became also Kafka's last friend (Figures 1, 2).

Robert Klopstock was born on October 31, 1899 in Dombóvár, Tolna, in the south-western part of Hungary, in a family of a railway-worker. He was educated at the Secondary Grammar School in Budapest where he passed his final leaving



Figure 1 – Villa Tatra sanatorium in Tatranské Matliare.

examination on March 1, 1917. In the following school years 1917/1918 and 1918/1919 Robert Klopstock was a medical student at the Faculty of Medicine, Budapest, Hungary. Later he suffered from lung tuberculosis and so he interrupted his study and in 1920 he was already a patient in sanatorium in Tatranské Matliare [1, 9, 11, 12]. In his letter from February 1921, Franz Kafka wrote to Max Brod from Tatranské Matliare about Robert Klopstock following sentences: “Yesterday night a 21-year-old student, a Jew from Budapest, disturbed me, but in a very friendly way. He is very hard-working, wise and he is literary talented, in spite of his whole rough appearance, he looks like Werfel, in the relationship to other people he is very helpful as a born physician, he is against Sionism, his leaders are Jesus and Dostoyevski, he came after 9 o’clock from the opposite main building, to give me a (unnecessary) compress, his extraordinary kindness to me is clearly influenced by Your name, which he knows very well” [2]. In his letter from March 16, 1921 Franz Kafka wrote to his sister Ottla from Tatranské Matliare about Robert Klopstock following words: “... They interrupted me, what happens very often to me: this unlucky medical student. I have not ever seen such a demonic performance so close to me yet. One does not know, whether that, what is here in the play, are good or bad powers, their strength is in any case huge. In the medieval period he would be regarded as obsessed. Nevertheless he is a 21-year-old young man, stout, big, broad shouldered, strong, ruddy-cheeked, extraordinary clever, real, unselfish, gentle... [10]. At the end of the year 1921 the medical student Robert Klopstock worked as an assistant of Dr. Steinfest in Tatranská Kotlina [9]. In the period from June 1921 to April 18, 1924 Franz Kafka wrote to his last friend Robert Klopstock from various places: from Prague, Planá n/Lužnicí, from Spa Müritz, from Berlin, Vienna and some other places, altogether 67 postcards, picture-postcards and letters, until his death [2, 4, 9, 10]. On June 3, 1924 Robert Klopstock together with Dora Diamant were also present at the death-bed of Franz Kafka in Kierling, near Klosterneuburg, not far from Vienna [1, 3, 9] .



*Figure 2 – Robert Klopstock and Franz Kafka together with patients and medical staff from Villa Tatra in Tatranské Matliare.*



Figure 3 – Place of residence of Robert Klopstock during his summer term in 1924, 11 Na Švihance, Vinohrady, Prague.



Figure 4 – Dr. Med. Robert Klopstock as a resident surgeon at Triboro Hospital in New York.

Since the summer semester (the 3rd term of his study) 1922 till the winter semester of the school year 1925/1926 Robert Klopstock studied at the Medical Faculty of German University in Prague. The first examination he passed on June 26, 1925. Partial exams of the 1st examination he passed as follows: general biology December 15, 1922 (excellent), medical physics December 15, 1922 (excellent), chemistry December 14, 1923 (satisfactory), anatomy May 29, 1925 (satisfactory), physiology June 19, 1925 (satisfactory) and histology June 26, 1925 (satisfactory). During his study at Medical Faculty of German University in Prague 1922 Robert Klopstock shared a flat with Franz Kafka at 6, Staroměstské Square (Kinsky Palace in that time), in the school year 1922/1923 he lived at 7, Bolzano Street. From summer semester 1923 Robert Klopstock lived at 38, Malostranské Square, from summer semester 1924 he lived at 11, Na Švihance, Vinohrady (Figure 3) not far from Švehla's University dormitory (later University dormitory of the May, 5th) and his last address was 3, Anenské Square (at Mr. Weil) not far from the present theatre Na Zábradlí [5, 6, 7].

In the school year 1926/1927 Robert Klopstock was a university student at the Medical Faculty of University in Kiel (Germany) and on June 26, 1933 he graduated from the Medical Faculty of the Berlin University (Germany). Robert Klopstock married Gizela Deutsch in Budapest in 1930. Gizela

Klopstock-Deutsch was a writer and a translator. She translated the first chapters of Franz Kafka's novel "Trial" into Hungarian language. Robert Klopstock together with his wife visited Tatranské Matliare in 1936 [4].

In the period from November 1, 1933 to November 30, 1937 Dr. Med. Robert Klopstock worked at surgical departments with lung specialization in Berlin and Budapest. During his specialized work as a surgeon who was dealing with lung diseases, he published 64, scientific papers, mainly in the American medical journals. Topics of his first papers were surgical treatment of lung tuberculosis [8]. In 1938 Dr. Med. Robert Klopstock went to the USA. In 1945 he worked as a resident surgeon at Triboro Hospital in New York (Figure 4). Later he worked at the Veterans Hospital in Brooklyn. He became Professor at Downstate Medical Center and was the Head of the Clinic of Lung Surgery.

Professor Dr. Med. Robert Klopstock died of vascular cerebral stroke on June 15, 1972, in New York and his wife Gizela outlived him for 23 years. The announcement about his death was published in New York Times on June 16, 1972 [4].

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