Dr. Franjo (Franz) Kresnik (1869–1943): a physician and a violin maker

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Arzt und Geigenbauer


Summary. Dr. Franjo (Franz) Kresnik (born Wien 1869 – died Rijeka 1943) was an excellent physician and a Central European intellectual, a bohemian mind whose two loves in life made him very special. His passions were medicine and violin making. Most of his life was spent in Sušak (now a part of Rijeka, Croatia), where he worked, played music and studied the art of making stringed instruments. He visited Cremona on several occasions and studied a number of violins, drawings and tools made and used by old masters. For his profound knowledge of Cremonese violin making the Italians dubbed him “Uomo che legge violini” (The Man Who Can Read Violins).

In his workshop he made fifty-two violins, two violas, two cellos and a string quartet. Some of these instruments are still played in Europe and America. The remaining violins and possessions (tools, manuscripts, drawings, literature and countless diplomas and certificates) have been kept in a memorial room at the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka. In addition, a street near the Faculty of Medicine in Rijeka is named after Franjo Kresnik.

Key words: History of medicine, 19th and 20th century, physicians, music, violin making, Austria, Croatia.

The intention of this article is to pay tribute to the memory of the extraordinary life of Franjo (Franz) Kresnik – physician, musician and violin maker. The authors have relied on biographical sources and encyclopedic references [1, 2], studies [3, 4] and heritage kept in Kresnik’s memorial room at the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka [5]. They have also relied on the memories of his older relatives and townspeople who were Dr. Kresnik’s patients.

Short biography of Dr. Franjo (Franz) Kresnik

Franjo (Franz) Kresnik was born in Vienna on 16 December 1869 to a young teacher of classical languages, Franjo Kresnik from Croatia, and a Viennese girl, Ottilia Kresnik née Sachs. The following year the family moved to Rijeka, as Franjo Kresnik Sr was given a teaching position in a Croatian grammar school. Later, from 1889 to 1907, he was the school’s headmaster [6] and he also actively participated in all social and cultural events of the town.

This background gave Franjo Kresnik Jr the opportunity not only to learn fine manners and obtain respectable grammar school education but also to express his particular talent for music. At the age of eight he began his violin classes with Prof. Alessandro Scaramelli and soon became his favorite student.

Having to decide about his future career and education on leaving the grammar school, Franjo Jr found himself in a severe dilemma: he had to choose between his love for the violin, that is, study of music at the Vienna Conservatorium, and pleasing his parents who were determined that he should study medicine. Records are not clear about the immediate outcome of this controversy, but Dr. Kresnik’s official biography [7, 8] mentions that in the winter semester of 1895/96 he left Graz and enrolled at Innsbruck Medical University, from which he graduated on 15 October 1900. For a while he was resident pediatri-
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Skrobonja and Muzur, Dr. Franjo (Franz) Kresnik (1869–1943): a physician and a violin maker

Between medicine and violin making

For all his education, knowledge of foreign languages, and social standing, Dr. Kresnik took great pleasure in the bohemian lifestyle and in the company of other people, caring little for the etiquette of the time. All agree that he was a fine diagnostician, especially in children. This is very understandable, since medicine is not only skill and knowledge but also inspiration, intuition and invention, something Kresnik’s artistic soul had in abundance. But what was he like as a therapist? A good many anecdotes told and retold to this day suggest that, beside regular therapeutic procedures used at the time, Kresnik would often resort to original and unexpected actions of his own making. His patients liked him a lot, holding him in high esteem, and would not bear a grudge even when they had to wait in the office for Dr. Kresnik to test a new violin or play a tune for his own pleasure. No visit to Dr. Kresnik’s was predictable. He had a talent for jokes, especially for making fun of those who deserved it. His distinctive appearance aroused curiosity in children, who would often chaff him in the street and fear to meet him in his office or on house calls. Amazingly enough, all these visits opened or closed with a joke that would later be passed on as an anecdote. Recalling their encounters with Dr. Kresnik, the remaining elders from Rijeka and Sušak, whose number is growing thin, believe that this particular way of establishing a relationship in fact earned Dr. Kresnik the lasting respect of his townspeople over the forty-odd years of his practice.

“Uomo che legge violini”

At some point, Dr. Kresnik took a break from medical studies to dedicate himself to the violin. As a student in Vienna, Graz and Innsbruck, he had the opportunity to see masterly performances and performers. His repressed passion for the violin emerged again on his return to Rijeka, where he met the Czech violin player Jaroslav Kocijan. As Dr. Kresnik renewed his interest in the techniques of playing stringed instruments, he became deeply fascinated by the nature of their sound. Guided by his scientific curiosity, he took up a serious study of acoustics, technology, and even chemistry. As he delved deeper into the subject, he gained insight into the secret world of the violin sound and took the ultimate challenge – to learn the secret of the Cremonese masterpieces, as many others before him had tried to no avail, including two of his French fellow physicians, Savart of Paris and Coutagne of Lyon.

During his lengthy stays in Cremona, his learned and charming personality won him great trust and gained him access to the violin masterpieces, drawings and tools of great masters. His knowledge of these violins became so deep that he could determine their maker and time of making not only from their looks but also from their timbre. This skill earned him the title “Uomo che legge violini” (The Man Who Can Read Violins) among the Cremonese.

When he started to make his own violins, his first model was Antonio Stradivari, and later Guarneri. To use his own words, from 1926 on, he had only been copying Josephus Guarneri del Gesù [9]. A few examples have been kept in the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka.

From 1933, he made his own type of violin, but the spirit of Guarneri remained. We learn of sturdy instruments with powerful sound, soft and noble timbre, supple to play and even for all strings [10]. Some believe that in the quality of sound several violins of his last, 1940 series match Guarneri and Stradivari.

Beside design, Kresnik paid much attention to wood and varnish. True, quality wood was easy to come by as Croatian forests were known to provide wood for old masters. How to make a varnish was quite another matter. Finding the right recipe took enormous effort and included gathering vast information on the subject, which violin makers and scholars tended to keep for themselves. Judging from a study published in Paris in 1932, it seems that Kresnik succeeded in remaking the old Cremonese recipe for violin varnish. [11]. At the same time he was writing a book which gathered all his knowledge and

Fig. 1. Dr. Franjo (Franz) Kresnik (1869–1943) (unknown authors, courtesy of the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral in Rijeka)